JOY and PAM

~~Marcus Margaret~~
~~Hudson~~
~~Brays~~
~~Va.~~

Sarah Ann Mundy
Tappahannock
Virginia

JOY AND PAM

BY

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"Joy and Gypsy Joe," "Joy and Her Chums," Etc.

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JOY AND PAM

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JOY AND PAM

CHAPTER I

JOY'S BIRTHDAY PARTY

IT was a brilliant autumn day. Puffy white clouds hung low in the sky, and seemed to crown the scarlet maple trees and the golden birches.

Joy Payton awoke to the knowledge of an eventful day, and dressed hurriedly. It was her eleventh birthday.

This was the first time that she remembered a birthday with her mother, for Joy at the age of six had run away with the gypsies, and lived with them for four years. The story of those days has already been told.

There was to be no party to-day, but a picnic in the woods, to which Pam Hotchkiss, her very best friend, Merry Talcott, and Sarah York had been invited. Of course, Flora Payton, Joy's mother, and Geoffrey Hotchkiss, Pam's father, were going too.

Instead of picnicking in the home woods, they were going in the automobile to a lake ten miles distant.

"Well, sleepy head, are you awake yet?" Flora Payton's voice came from the doorway. "Many happy returns of the day, and twelve kisses, one to grow on."

"Mummy, I feel so much older!" Joy exclaimed. "Do you think Pam will notice it? Do I look more grown up?"

"Oh! ages older," laughed Flora; "I can see the gray hairs."

"Now you're teasing," Joy laughed back at her mother, "but, honestly, I do *feel* older."

"Too old to go down and wake Pam, and bring her back for breakfast?"

"Oh, no, I'll go right away; and may I ride Cricket? He'll need exercise to-day."

"I suppose so," Flora replied. She had never become used to Joy's riding off on her pony. She was always fearful lest something happen to the child who had been so miraculously returned to her.

Joy was off in a second. She ran out to the barn, and with Patrick's help put the saddle on Cricket. She was soon mounted and the pony's hoofs rang a tattoo on the macadam road as they covered the short distance between the two houses.

Pam Hotchkiss was four months younger than Joy. She lived alone in the big white house with her father (who was a successful

novelist) and the servants. She had red hair and blue eyes, in direct contrast to Joy's darkness, for Joy looked like a gypsy. The year before Pam had been an invalid, there being something very wrong with her back; but a clever doctor had cured her, and she and Joy had begun lessons together.

Pam heard the pony's hoofs on the gravel under her window. She bounded out of bed, and over to it.

"Down in a minute!" she called.

"We've time for a ride before breakfast," Joy replied.

"You go saddle Clinker while I'm taking my bath," said Pam, and disappeared from view.

Joy rode around to the barn and by the time Pam joined her, Clinker was saddled, and the two ponies were hobnobbing together in the roadway.

Joy started to go into the house, but Pam forestalled her.

"Joy Payton, don't you dare open that front door! You might see your birthday present and that would spoil everything."

"But it's my birthday," Joy complained. "Why can't I see it?"

"Never!" replied Pam. "That's part of the surprise."

They had a gallop before breakfast and stopped at Pam's house to tell Mr. Hotchkiss he would be alone for that meal. He came out on the steps to wish Joy many happy returns of the day.

When they reached the dining room there was a surprise in store for Joy. She found four boxes at her place, all neatly tied up with ribbon—one was long and very narrow, one very flat, one very small, and the last square and large.

"Oh! Joy, open the long one first!" Pam exclaimed. "It's such a funny shape. What do you suppose it can be?"

Joy unwrapped it and discovered in a bed of tissue paper a pigskin riding whip with a silver top, and her name engraved in black letters.

"Oh! Mummy," Joy cried, "how heavenly!"

"But I didn't give it to you, dear child. I'm just as surprised as you are. Look at the card and see whom it's from," said Flora.

Joy looked at the card and found on it: "For Crickett's mistress from her devoted Colonel."

"Oh! wasn't that adorable of him? We will ride over after breakfast and thank him!" Joy said, excitedly.

The Colonel was an old friend of Joy's

father and had been interested in her since her father's death, which had occurred when Joy was a little girl.

"Quick, open the next box!" Pam cried, handing her the flat one.

This disclosed a pair of riding gauntlets of heavy leather. Joy drew them on appreciatively.

"Who gave me these?" she wondered.

"Look and see, silly," said Pam.

"From Anne York," Joy read from the birthday card of bluebirds attached.

"How sweet of Miss York!" Joy exclaimed. "We'll ride over there, too, and thank her."

"We won't have time before the picnic, but never mind; open the little box next," Pam hurried her.

Joy opened it, and there before her rapturous gaze lay a tiny gold wrist watch.

"Oh! Mummy, Mummy, how wonderful! I've always wanted one like Pam's, and now I have it; and I know you gave it to me, didn't you? Oh! put it on quick!" Joy was wild with excitement.

Flora fastened the yellow ribbon band around her wrist, and she looked at it from every angle.

"Pam, is it just like yours?" she asked.

"Just exactly, except for the initials. *Now*

we are twins!" Pam exclaimed. "Of course my ribbon is green."

"That's why I got Joy's in yellow. I always think of you as wearing green and Joy maize," Flora told them.

"That makes them our very own colors, doesn't it? Oh! promise me we can always have things the same in green and yellow, dresses and everything," Joy beseeched.

"Well, lots of things," Flora conceded.

"There's another box, Miss Joy," Jane reminded her—Jane had been Joy's nurse.

It was the big square one, and Joy opened it curiously. She found inside another box, and opened that, only to find another and another. There were ten boxes in all and the last one was sealed with sealing wax. At last it was opened and there was a tiny horse in red enamel, with a thin silver chain attached. Under it was a little card with the words:

"Joy would a horse-back go
and so,
We send a little horse
you know.
Bob and Ted."

"Oh, how nice of them!" sighed Joy. "Why is everybody so lovely to me?"

"People are always nice to you on birthdays," Pam explained.

"It seems to me people are nice to me all the time," laughed Joy.

Flora picked up the riding whip.

"Let's ask the Colonel to go to the picnic with us," she suggested.

"Oh! let's. I thought you and Mr. Hotchkiss might not want him," Joy replied, hesitatingly.

"Not want him!" exclaimed her mother. "Why, dear child, we always want the Colonel. What made you say that?"

"Nothing, only you and Pam's father always have such fun together, like Pam and me; and, well, we thought maybe you wouldn't want any other grown-ups along."

"Silly child!" admonished Flora, blushing.

After breakfast they started off, Joy carrying her new whip. They found the Colonel seated in an easy-chair on his veranda.

"Colonel, it's such a darling! I'll always think of you when I carry it." Joy was unusually enthusiastic. "You won't mind if I lend it to Pam now and again, will you? She has just an ordinary one."

"Buy Pam one on her birthday, or Christmas, if you like," the Colonel said gruffly.

"Oh, Colonel, make it Christmas!" Pam exclaimed, "that's ever so much nearer."

"Very well, make it Christmas," the Colonel

replied; "and now, what are you doing on your birthday?"

"We are going on a picnic, and we want you to go, too," Joy told him.

"Don't let's tell him who'll be with us, or where we are going," Pam interrupted.

"Say you'll come," Joy teased.

"Suppose so; tho' I hate a pack of youngsters, and a picnic worse," growled the Colonel.

From there they went to the gardener's cottage, occupied by Miss York and her little niece, Sarah. Miss York had been Pam's governess, and Joy shared her. Through the bounty of Mr. Hotchkiss she now lived with her orphan niece in a cottage originally built for a gardener, but empty since Mr. Hotchkiss had bought the place.

Miss York had several pupils beside Pam and Joy. This being Saturday, there were no lessons.

Sarah came to greet them. She was a pale, thin, blonde, little thing and she had on an enormous apron this morning, for she was helping with the household tasks.

"Aunt Anne has a headache, and I don't think I had better go to the picnic," she said sorrowfully.

The Colonel had nicknamed her "Whisper,"

and it suited her perfectly, for she was truly a whisper.

"Oh!" sighed Pam, "what a shame!" and she thought guiltily of the many times she had left Miss York with a headache.

"Oh! Sarah, it will be quite all right to leave me," said Miss York, joining them. "Many happy returns of the day, Joy."

"Sniffs," (another nickname bestowed by the Colonel) "the gauntlets were perfectly lovely, and I've come to thank you for them; and please let Whisper go if you possibly can. Merry is coming, and we'll miss her terribly if she doesn't."

"Of course, she must go," Miss York replied.

"Are you sure, quite sure, it will be all right to leave you?" Sarah asked solicitously.

"Certainly," Miss York replied.

"Then meet us at the house at eleven o'clock," Joy called as they rode off.

"Do you know," Pam said, bringing her pony down to a walk, "Sarah is almost too good."

"I was thinking that very same thing," said Joy. "I'm afraid Merry will dislike her."

The car was at the door at eleven o'clock and they were all there to crowd into it. They

drove to the lake, a clear, sparkling patch of water in the midday sun.

The Colonel and Geoffrey Hotchkiss built the fire, and Flora and the girls set the table-cloth, which was laid on a flat rock.

Merry Talcott, a jolly little blonde, who talked incessantly, had been silent for a wonder on the trip. She was taking Sarah in.

"Do you know," she said at last, "I think I'm going to like you just heaps. You're so sort of peaceful."

"Oh, will you?" whispered Sarah, eagerly.

"Of course I will, you dear, sweet thing; only you mustn't be too good!" Merry replied.

"Oh, I don't want to be too good," said Sarah.

Geoffrey Hotchkiss called them to luncheon, and they ate heartily of the broiled steak and baked potatoes.

After the dishes were washed up, Pam called Merry aside.

"Here's a sandwich, Spruce's favorite," she said, "take it to him, but don't let him know I sent it."

Spruce was Merry's brother.

"How heavenly of you, and how exciting! It gives me the very best chance to tease old Spruce," Merry laughed; "and *how* I'll tease,

for of course I can make him know you sent it to him without telling him so."

"Merry Talcott, if you dare—give me back that sandwich!"

Pam threw herself on the unsuspecting Merry, and before the scrimmage ended the sandwich was in bits.

"Mean thing," teased Merry, "never mind, I'll tell him you were *going* to send it, anyway."

A spirited game of "Kick the Can" followed, in which the Colonel, Flora, and Geoffery joined, and had as much fun as the girls. On the way home Joy asked shyly.

"Mr. Hotchkiss, why wouldn't Pam let me in your house this morning?"

"Wait and see," replied that exasperating man, with a mysterious smile.

She did not have very long to wait, for when she reached home she heard a dog barking, and standing beside Jane as she opened the door was a little wire-haired fox terrier puppy.

"There's our birthday present to you," Pam said.

Joy sat right down on the floor and the puppy ran to her arms.

It was the very best moment of the day.

CHAPTER II

THE NAMING OF "CLOWN"

THE first thing to do with the new dog was to show it to Bob and Ted. So Pam and Joy rode over on their ponies Monday afternoon after school, and the boys came back with them riding their bicycles. They made a curious looking quartet as they came up the Payton driveway.

"Where's the pup?" Bob demanded, and a yelping from the barn answered his question.

"Funny, you haven't got a dog," Pam said.

"We had one," defended Ted, "a big Airedale terrier, only it died. We all loved it so much that Mother vowed we'd never have another one. I suppose if your dog died you'd get another to-morrow."

"I would not!" Pam denied hotly. "I never would have any other dog but Soncy."

"Then you see why we haven't one," Ted replied.

They found Joy's puppy in a stall, trying very hard to jump over the board that kept him a prisoner. He went straight to Bob, and

wagged his little tail so hard that his whole body wriggled.

"What are you going to name him?" Bob asked.

"I can't think. I was trying to all night. I wish I could find a name as cute as Soncy. I named the horse you gave me 'Root' after your whole family," Joy told him. "I've thought of Hotchkiss, but that's too long, and 'Kiss' is silly. You think of something."

"Our dog was named 'Annabel Lee,' but I never thought much of it as a name," Bob admitted.

"We'll have to go to the Colonel," Pam decided, "he always nicknames everything for me, and he named Soncy."

Having reached this decision, the rest agreed with her, and they dragged the dog over to Colonel Tracy's. They found him alone. The ex-Sergeant was having his day out—the ex-Sergeant was the Colonel's colored servant.

"Hello! what's this young moth ball?" he greeted.

"Well," said Joy dubiously, "we'll call him 'Moth,' though it isn't exactly the name I wanted."

"Great Scott! child, I didn't know I was naming your dog when I said that. Surely

we can think up a better name than ' Moth.' "

They all looked at the puppy as though expecting a suggestion from him. He returned their gaze with interest, tried to sit up on his hind legs, and toppled over ridiculously.

"Clown!" said the Colonel.

"Clown! That's the very name!" shouted Bob. "It's ever so much better than 'Moth.' "

"I told you the Colonel would think up one," said Pam.

The Colonel looked at the four faces beside him, and decided he liked these children. He was always deciding that about Pam's friends, but not for the world would he have admitted that they were anything but exceptions. The Colonel prided himself on not liking children.

"You had better stay to tea with me," he said, with his usual gruffness.

"Oh! can we get it ourselves?" Pam implored.

"You may," the Colonel told her, and in a burst of generosity he added: "The kitchen is yours."

"What a lark!" Pam exclaimed.

Then they all went into the kitchen.

"Let's make a bang-up tea," Ted suggested.

"And have it in the dining-room," Bob went on. "I hate having to hold a plate on my lap."

Joy looked around the kitchen appraisingly.

"We might give him so much to eat that he wouldn't have to get his own dinner," she said.

Pam perched on the table.

"I know," she said, "we'll each one make our favorite food, and serve it."

"I don't know how to make pancakes," Bob replied ruefully.

"And there isn't time for ice cream," complained Ted.

"Sillies," Pam corrected, "I mean tea foods, not dinner foods. I'll make cream cheese and pineapple sandwiches on brown bread."

"Well," said Ted thoughtfully, "I never ate this, but I think it sounds good. Salmon and olives."

"I'll make cucumber sandwiches. I think I know how. Just slice them up and put pepper and salt on them, between white bread."

Bob's eyes were traveling along the assortment of tins on the cupboard shelf.

"Here's mine," he announced triumphantly and waved a square tin of corned beef hash. "This ought to make bully sandwiches," he said. "And, I say, let's all drink tea."

"I hate the stuff, but I will if you dare me," Ted replied.

"We'll all do it," said Pam.

"How about opening the cans?" Joy asked, rummaging through the drawer for a can opener.

"Let me do the job; that's boys' work," Bob insisted, though Joy had rather wanted the fun of it herself.

"I'll open my own can," Ted announced.

Of course they both cut their fingers, but Pam made such a fuss about them, and tore up her own as well as Joy's handkerchief to bandage them, that they rather enjoyed it.

Finally, with the aid of a screw driver and a hammer, the cans were opened, and they proceeded with the making of the sandwiches.

If the girls won the prize for daintiness, the boys made up for it in size. Altogether, there were twenty-five sandwiches and there was no bread left in the bread box.

When the Colonel saw the plates piled high and tasted the tea, which was lukewarm, he tried to be grumpy, but he succeeded only in chuckling. He ate a large amount, so as not to hurt anybody's feelings; but he could not keep up with the boys, who surpassed even their own expectations, and ate and ate and ate.

The girls washed up the dishes, for Pam would not hear of leaving them for the Sergeant; and the boys dried them.

"Gee! Colonel, you certainly gave us a good time," Bob said in parting. "I wonder if you would like us to make tea for you every time the Sergeant goes out."

"Heaven forbid!" said the Colonel fervently; but under his breath. "I wouldn't think of asking so much of you," he said aloud.

"Oh, we'd like it," Pam assured him. "We'll come over every week."

"And I hope there's always a can of corned beef hash. Those were some sandwiches that we made, I'll say," Bob was triumphant.

"Isn't the Colonel a darling? I love him next to Pops," Pam explained as they walked home in the face of the setting sun.

"We'll make that an engagement every Monday," Ted said definitely. "Like the 'Kick the Can' Club."

"Let's form a secret society and call it the 'Colonials' and have it meet at his house the day the Sergeant is away, and we'll have the password 'Eats,' " Bob suggested.

"Can we have any other members?" Pam asked, thinking of Whisper and Merry.

"Not unless we ask the Colonel," Bob replied.

"And if you're thinking of Whisper York,

I say no; that girl is too good for words," Ted ejaculated.

"You see, we have to think of our position in school with the other fellows," Bob explained.

"It's all right going with you two girls, because you've got ponies," Ted went on; "besides, Joy was a gypsy once; and, Pam, you're sort of different, too; but we'd be razzed to death if we went with 'Whisper.' "

Pam and Joy thought for a minute in silence. They answered according to their different dispositions.

"I call it mean," said Pam, who always championed the under-dog.

"I understand," said Joy, who always understood boys.

That night the Colonel had three invitations to dinner, but he refused them all.

The next morning there were lessons as usual, and Pam and Joy did so well that Miss York promised to take them to see Miss Lathrop that very afternoon. Miss Lathrop kept a school, to which the Roots and Talcotts went, and Joy and Pam were anxious to be enrolled.

"If you think before you answer, you will impress her with your knowledge, I am sure," Miss York said.

"But will we be in the intermediate class with the twins?" Joy wanted to know.

"I think so—in fact, I'm sure of it. You have a little French, some algebra, and a good deal of literature to your credit. I don't see why you shouldn't be in that class."

"You have forgotten geography," Pam reminded her, "and I'm very weak in that."

"But there is history, we're both good in history, especially Roman," Joy put in. "Hope she asks us the seven kings of Rome," and she chanted: "Romulus, Numa Pompilius, Tulus Hostilius—"

"Oh, do stop," sighed Pam. "I never remember them straight. Sniffs, I know she will ask us that very question."

But Miss Lathrop was not nearly as interested in the Roman Kings as they thought she would be. She wanted Joy and Pam as pupils, because she had heard of them; their fame was all over the countryside, and she thought they were just the girls she would like in her school.

Miss Lathrop was a placid, middle-aged lady, with hair that was graying at the temples; while her cold blue eyes had a trick of looking into you, rather than at you. She seldom raised her voice, but preferred, as she said, to rule by sheer reasonableness. She

had an honor system that worked well, and her pupils, if they did not adore her exactly, all respected her.

The school was in Miss Lathrop's private home, a big, square house with a mansard roof, and two iron deer in the front yard. It was on the main street of the little village. The old drawing-room was the assembly hall, and the library and dining-room were class-rooms. The Lathrops lived on the second floor.

Miss York and the two girls were ushered into the library, where Miss Lathrop sat behind a big, severe-looking desk,

"Sit down, girls; I am very glad to see you; and, Miss York, I'm more than glad to see you. I hear you have done splendid things with these girls."

"Oh! thank you," said Miss York, deprecatingly. "I hope they will be ready for the intermediate class."

"We will very soon decide that. Suppose you tell me what they have been doing," said Miss Lathrop.

"Literature seems to be their best subject," she continued after Miss York had told her. "I think that will do very well as a starter, and, as you say, you can coach them in mathematics a couple of afternoons a week."

"Oh!" sighed Pam inaudibly.

"I am sure they will be willing to do that," Miss York assured her.

"Then I think we can take it as settled that they will start school after the Christmas vacation. I am sure we shall be very glad to welcome them as pupils."

As they were saying good-by, Miss Lathrop asked if they would not like to see the Assembly Hall. She opened the door as they passed it, and the girls saw a lone figure seated at a desk in a far corner. It was Stephen Winthrop, and he looked up and grinned at Joy and Pam.

"Why, Stephen, are you still here?" Miss Lathrop inquired.

"Yes, ma'am—I mean Miss Lathrop. You told me to stay until I had learned the rule about parallel lines, and I haven't learned it yet," he replied.

"Stephen, I am afraid you are being stubborn," Miss Lathrop said calmly, and went out of the door without looking at him again.

"Ouch!" said Joy, as they walked down the front drive. "I'd much rather get a good scolding than be spoken to in that cool way."

"I wonder," said Pam, with a speculative look in her blue eyes, "what the Colonel will nickname Miss Lathrop. I shouldn't be surprised if he called her 'Chilly.'"

CHAPTER III

UNCLE WILLIAM

JOY and her mother were at breakfast on a rainy morning when the post came.

"Here's a letter from your Uncle William," Flora Payton announced, opening a square white envelope; she read the contents in silence and then smiled at Joy.

"It's an invitation to spend a week with Gloria," she said.

"Oh! Mummy, a whole week! How dreadful!" Joy replied, aghast. "But I can't leave school that long, can I?" she added hopefully.

"No, I think a week is too long. We will spend a week-end, and that will give you time to get acquainted with your Uncle William and your Aunt Ida."

"I don't much want to go," said Joy, sorrowfully.

"But, darling, your Uncle William is your father's only brother. He is a very busy man, and he is taking a vacation this week, so it will be just the chance for you to meet him."

"Mummy, you're coming too, aren't you?

You wouldn't send me there all by myself."

"No, of course not; I am going with you; and, Joy, you really must be nice to Gloria."

"I'll try," said Joy, noncommittally.

Gloria Payton had visited Joy the summer before, and Joy and Pam and the Root twins had decided they did not like her at all; while Gloria, on her side, had some cause for discontent, for they had taken her out to the pond and washed her face because they did not approve of the rouge and powder which she used.

Joy met Pam at the cottage that morning and told her of the invitation.

"It will be terrible!" said Pam, "simply terrible. She will get even with you for the way we treated her."

"I know," said Joy. "Three long, dreadful days! I hate it; but Mummy says I have to go."

"I wish I were going with you," said Pam. "She wouldn't dare be mean to both of us."

Whisper came into the room just then, and interrupted further confidences.

"I have been considering," she said primly, "about giving a tea party on Saturday afternoon. Aunt Anne says she will make a sponge cake and we can have hot chocolate."

"Oh! Whisper, I can't come," Joy replied; then, at the downcast look on Whisper's face, she added: "It's not my fault, really. I have to go and visit an uncle, aunt, and cousin in Albany; but I'll think about you all the time, and wish I were here."

"Oh! but Joy, we couldn't think of having a party without you," Whisper replied, breathlessly. "We'll postpone it until next week; but, oh! dear, what shall I do about Merry? I've asked her to come, and she's accepted."

"Well, have us over here, anyhow; even if we don't have a party, we can hatch up some fun, anyway," Pam said; "though I don't expect to have very much fun when Joy's away. I'll miss you simply dreadfully, Joy; and I don't see why that stupid Gloria didn't ask me, too."

"Whisper, you may ride my pony while I'm gone; but don't forget to miss me," Joy said dolefully.

"Oh!" was all Whisper could reply.

Joy said good-by to the Root twins that afternoon, and she said it as if she were going away for a year. She dreaded this trip to Gloria's, and her only thought was to get it over with.

The car took them in to the Grand Central

Station, where they were to get the Express to Albany. They were to meet Mr. Payton, who was going up with them.

Joy was interested by the crowds of people. She wandered off while her mother sat in the waiting room. In the midst of all that throng she saw a woman with a red handkerchief about her head. She was gesticulating wildly at one of the ticket windows; but as she was talking Romany (gypsy talk), the poor ticket-seller was at a complete loss.

Joy stood and stared at her for a few minutes, then she asked shyly in the same tongue if she could help. The woman looked at her in blank astonishment; then she explained with many gestures that she wanted tickets for Buffalo, that her Rom (husband) was sick, that the other men were useless, and that the whole responsibility of taking her tribe to that city rested on her shoulders.

Joy nodded understandingly, asked her how many tickets she wanted, and bought them for her. The woman had a large supply of money, and she made considerable fuss that the tickets were not larger—she wanted value received for so much cash.

When the transaction was over, she turned to Joy and demanded how she came to under-

stand gypsy talk. Joy explained in as few words as possible, and the woman insisted upon taking her over to see the rest of the tribe.

Then Joy saw the strangest of sights, a gypsy camp in one corner of the Grand Central Station. Some of the men were asleep. While the women sat and gossiped, the children played tag amongst them. Such a chattering of tongues was never heard; and the astonishment of the gypsies when they heard the story, was second only to the surprise of the onlookers when they saw a child of their own race talking fluently to these dark-skinned nomads.

Joy had found out that they were going to meet Liubo, who was her own gypsy chief; and she sent countless messages to Joe, Mother Ia and Persa.

It was in the center of an admiring group that Flora and Mr. Payton found her.

"Joy, darling, come quickly, or we will miss our train," Mrs. Payton called; and the spectators were more amazed than ever.

Joy said a hasty good-by, and the gypsies droned the Del-o-Del Vaxt of gypsy parting.

Mr. Payton was a middle-aged, stout man, with worried wrinkles on his face; his mouth was firm, and he had a gray Van Dyke beard.

He looked at Joy in wonder and amazement.

"Well, well, this is a great place to find you," he said. "Aren't you afraid those gypsies will carry you away again?"

"The gypsies are my friends," said Joy.

If Uncle William was going to start in hating the gypsies, this promised to be a terrible week-end.

"Oh, they are, eh?" with new interest. "Then they treated you decently; I can hardly credit it; they seem a barbarous lot to me."

Joy and her mother were having a hard time keeping up with his long strides as he led them toward the gate, and Joy decided that he was not at all an "uncly" kind of an uncle. He shot her a curious glance now and again, but contented himself with talking most of the time with Flora.

Reaching Albany at last, they found a limousine waiting for them. They rode well up on the hill, where they came to a house that looked exactly like Mr. Payton. It was like a dozen other houses scattered through the country. It was white Colonial in modern style, and boasted a large sun porch. Joy did not know why she thought it looked like Mr. Payton; but she did, and the idea made her mother laugh.

Gloria and Mrs. William Payton were waiting for them in the hall. Mrs. Payton was tall, and thin, and looked very bored; like Mr. Payton, she had worried lines around her mouth.

Gloria looked cross and sullen. She had had to forego a party in order to be there when her cousin arrived.

"So this is Joy?" Ida Payton said, listlessly. "She seems a sweet child."

"How do you do, Aunt Ida?" Joy replied, and holding out her hand, she curtsied charmingly.

"Oh! dear, I could never make Gloria curtsy," her aunt sighed.

"Oh! Mother, do leave me alone," Gloria protested. "Hello! Joy, glad to see you! How did you leave your friend, Pam? Hello! Aunt Flora, I really am awfully glad to see you."

Flora looked at her in dismay. She was so attractive and yet she looked so unhappy.

Ida Payton showed them to their room and left them to prepare for dinner.

"Joy, dear," said Flora, "I know you don't like being here, but please try to be very, very good, for my sake."

Joy only half understood what she meant, but she promised whole-heartedly. Dinner

that night was a trying affair. Gloria wanted to go to the movies, and her father said she couldn't go.

"Oh! let them both go," said Aunt Ida, "and then we can have bridge in peace."

"Let Gloria go, by all means, but Joy must go to bed at eight o'clock. She has had a strenuous day," Flora suggested.

"Eight o'clock? That's what I call sensible," said Uncle William.

"And will she go? How beautiful!" exclaimed Aunt Ida; and they all looked at Joy.

"Do you like going to bed at eight o'clock?" Gloria demanded.

Not for worlds would Joy have told that she went to bed at nine o'clock when she was at home. That would be letting her mother down, and Joy was too good a sport to do that.

"Oh! I'm sleepy about that time," she said, good-naturedly, and came very near exchanging a wink with her mother.

Gloria sniffed exactly like Miss York, and Joy giggled.

"Well, if you won't think it's awfully rude, and you are sure Joy doesn't mind, I'll let Gloria go," said Gloria's mother.

"Gloria stays home," said Mr. Payton. "We will say no more about it."

"Oh! now, Father, all the girls are going," Gloria whined, "and I'm fourteen."

"Let the child go, William," Aunt Ida protested.

"Very well, then," said Uncle William; and Joy somehow felt sorry for him.

Gloria left the table hurriedly, and they heard the door slam a few minutes later. She had not come in to say good night to any of them.

"Now, William, you take Joy, and amuse her. I want to talk to Flora," Aunt Ida said.

"All right," Uncle William replied, half-heartedly. "Come into my study, and tell me about the gypsies."

Joy told. At eight o'clock there was no interruption, nor yet at nine o'clock. Uncle William asked questions and then waited eagerly for the answers. Before ten o'clock Joy had whistled bird calls for him, and had danced a Russian dance, and Uncle William was her devoted slave.

In the sun parlor Ida Payton and Flora were discussing Gloria.

"My dear, I can't do a thing with her," said her mother. "I want your advice."

"Are all the girls here like Gloria?" Flora asked, and Ida Payton seemed to consider.

"No, they are not," she admitted reluctantly; "but Gloria seems only to fancy that kind."

"Do you really want my advice?" Flora asked, seriously.

"Indeed, I do, and I will take it, too. I'm desperate."

"Then," said Flora gravely, "I'd send her to boarding school—not a fashionable one, mind, but a place where they go in strong for athletics."

"Do you know of such a place?" Ida Payton inquired.

"Well, I know of a school where Edna Root is going next term. Gloria liked Edna, and Marcia Gordon."

"Yes, I know it," Ida Payton agreed. "She told me about them. Well, I'll think it over," she continued.

And just then Gloria came in.

"Hello, everybody! Where's the Angel Child? Tucked up in bed, I suppose. Let's turn on the radio."

"Mercy!" exclaimed Flora. "I'd forgotten all about Joy. She is in the den talking to your father."

"Come, let's rescue him," said Ida Payton.

But Uncle William didn't wish to be rescued.

"Go away, all of you," he said. "I'm having the time of my life. As soon as Joy goes to bed I am going out to find a gypsy, and apologize to him."

And with amazement Ida Payton heard her husband laugh a hearty, carefree laugh.

The next day there was a party given in Joy's honor. It cannot be said that she had a very good time at it. The children were all older than she, and after the dancing began she found herself very often without a partner.

Then Mr. Payton came in, and everything was changed in a twinkling. He clapped his hands, cleared the floor, and announced that Joy would do a gypsy dance. He, himself, played her accompaniments. Joy danced in defiance of the miserable time she had had that afternoon.

At the end of the dance the rest clustered around her, paying high compliments, but Joy received them coldly. She did not believe that one of these girls or boys had ever played "Kick the Can" in their lives, or had ever ridden on a pony. They seemed to be "indoor" children.

Uncle William was her chosen companion for the rest of the afternoon. Sunday they spent looking at the daily papers, and motor-

ing. Joy liked it principally because she knew she was going home on the morrow.

Flora made school an excuse, and they left on an early train Monday morning, spent a little time shopping in New York, and took a train for home.

The first faces they saw on the station platform were those of Pam and Mr. Hotchkiss.

"Oh!" sighed Joy, "isn't it good to be *home!* Only I wish we could have brought Uncle William with us."

CHAPTER IV

FOLLOW THE LEADER

THE "Kick the Can" Club met, and Merry proposed Whisper as a member. There was some disagreement, but in the end Bob and Ted said they didn't care much if she came in, if she were never "It" with them.

"Of course, she can come in; she's Merry's best friend," Spruce announced; and the rest were silent.

"Anyway," said Stephen Winthrop, "we can't play 'Kick the Can' very much longer, and what I want to know is, do we disband, or do we form another Club, as we did last year?"

"Coasting and skating, of course," said Spruce, "with hot chocolate afterwards; and we can use Joy's and Pam's ponies to pull up the sleds."

"I think snowshoes would be fun," suggested Marcia, "or skis."

"Skis *would* be fun, but we'll have to wait until we are older. We would probably kill

ourselves. The twins would, anyway," Edna Root explained.

The meeting was being held at the Roots', and after a little time for "Kick the Can," since the meeting had taken up most of the afternoon, Mrs. Root called them in for refreshments.

"And now that I've got you all here," she said, "I have a very bad plan to offer. I know you will none of you like it, but I am afraid I am going to make you do it, even if you don't."

"It has something to do with school," groaned Dandy.

"Not a thing," laughed Mrs. Root. "It has to do with a new kind of fair, and I think Joy can help us a lot."

Joy looked her surprise.

"It's for the benefit of the Home for Crippled Boys, and you ought to be very willing to give up your time to it."

"Fancy work," said Merry, "I know. Mabs worked for that last year, and I helped her knit."

"But this year we are going to do lots of things besides knitting. It's going to be a different kind of a fair, with cakes and pies and animals for sale—that's what I thought you would be interested in. We are going to sell

puppies and cats, goldfishes and bunnies; and you are to do it. Here's where Joy helps, for it's going to have a gypsy corner; and Joy's to be Queen of the Gypsies, and will dance. Now, the question is: Where shall we have it?"

The Talcotts exchanged looks, and Spruce nodded reluctantly.

"You can have our Forest of Arden," Merry said. "It would make a lovely Gypsy Camp by the old tree, only—" Merry stopped, ashamed. "Never mind," she said.

"Say it, child. Is the Forest of Arden a very special spot of yours?" Mrs. Root asked, seriously.

She guessed that Merry was making a sacrifice, and she did not want her to. She had had a special dell as a child, and she understood what a terrible thing it would be to have it broken into.

"Well, it has always been ours; but we can't be so selfish. We have let Joy and Pam and Whisper in, so I guess everybody can come."

"But, Merry, I don't think the dell is a good place," Edna complained. "It's too crowded, and besides, we'd break all the trees getting in there with the booths."

"That's true," said Dandy, with relief. "Let's think up a better place."

Joy was considering. She, too, had her favorite spot in the woods and she didn't want to see a lot of strange people there, but she decided that this was selfish, and after a little struggle in her heart, she said diffidently:

"There's the big glade where the gypsies camp. That's near the road."

"I don't believe I know just exactly where it is," said Mrs. Root. "Let's tramp over and see it."

The rest agreed, and Stephen said jokingly:

"Mrs. Root, I dare you to play 'Follow the Leader.'"

Mrs. Root jumped up.

"Done!" she exclaimed. "If you will let me be leader."

"No, sir—I mean ma'am—I mean Mrs. Root, I'm going to be leader."

"Fen walking in brooks, and I'll come," she said.

They started off, Stephen leading. He was surprised at Mrs. Root, and felt a little envious of Bob and Ted. His mother would never think of playing "Follow the Leader." He decided Mrs. Root was a good fellow, as he led the way over stone walls and across fields, the rest following him.

As they neared the village street Mrs. Root, who was directly in back of him, called softly:

"I dare you to go to the drug store and order ice-cream cones all around."

"Mean it?" grinned Stephen.

"Try it and see," answered Mrs. Root.

He led them, single file, down the shady, drowsy village street to the drug store and walked in.

"Chocolate ice-cream cone," he demanded.

And, one after another, they ordered the same thing of the disgusted clerk, who had no use for such goings-on.

At the door, all armed with their chocolate cones, they met Mrs. Talcott. She had come in her ricketty Ford and was delighted at meeting the procession.

"Mayn't I come, too?" she demanded.

Mrs. Root was about to laughingly make way for her when Merry exclaimed:

"Mabs, you haven't been invited; and, anyway, you have the car, and we are going across fields, and maybe the rest don't want you, and—"

"Merry!" thundered Dandy. "Come on, Mabs, we'll let you in, I guess."

"Oh! yes, come along, Mrs. Talcott!" cried Joy and Pam.

"What will I do with the Ford? And I must have an ice-cream cone, and—"

"Mabs," said Spruce, reprovingly, "leave the car here and we'll come back for it."

"Here's your ice-cream cone," said Dandy.

"Oh! Mabs, I'm terribly glad they let you come. We are going into the woods to look at—"

This time Dandy said nothing, but he quietly put his hand over Merry's mouth, and Merry stamped her foot in impotent rage.

"All ready!" sang out Stephen. "Off we march!" and he began to sing in a voice high and sweet and ridiculously like a girl's, "Follow the Swallow back Home."

At a turn of the road, Mrs. Root stopped suddenly.

"Good gracious! here comes the Rector! Now, Stephen, do behave."

Stephen cast a grin over his left shoulder.

The Rector came nearer, and looked at them curiously. He was a nearsighted little man, with a jolly smile and a Scotch accent.

"What's all this?" he asked, peering at Stephen, who made him an elaborate bow.

"Oh! this is for the benefit of the Crippled Boys' Home," Mrs. Root told him; "that is, in a sort of a way. Won't you join us?"

"I'm afraid I can't do that," said Dr.

Forbes, "I have an appointment, though I regret not to be able to assist in so worthy an enterprise, and in so worthy a manner," and he lifted his hat, and bowed to them just as Stephen had bowed to him.

"He's all right, is Dr. Forbes. I'll go to Sunday School next Sunday, see if I don't," said Stephen, and Mrs. Root laughed.

"Why, Stephen, you are in the choir; don't you always go to Sunday School?" she asked.

"No, ma'am, almost never," replied Stephen.

Mrs. Root wisely made no reply. One does not preach when playing "Follow the Leader."

They soon passed the gates of the Hotchkiss place.

"Oh! please," called Merry, "can't we stop in and get Whisper?"

"Yes, please do!" cried Winifred Betts. "I'm crazy to meet her."

"You won't like her," said Bob, under his breath.

Stephen halted the column, and Merry dashed into the little cottage. She came back, leading a reluctant Whisper, whom she introduced to the Betts and Stephen Winthrop. Whisper was so excited that her lips trembled.

"Now she's going to cry," said Ted, but, fortunately, only Bob heard him.

"Whisper, isn't it thrilling? You're in the 'Kick the Can' Club!" Pam exclaimed, while Joy added:

"The next meeting is at the Talcotts', and we'll take you over."

"It's just wonderful," said Whisper, in an awed sort of way, while two tears stood in her eyes.

Remember, Whisper had been the only child on a big New England farm, and had never had anyone to play with. She had worked very hard for a child of ten, and really didn't know how to play.

"But I don't know any games," said Whisper.

"Gee! what a funny kid!" said Stephen, not unkindly. "Come up here, and follow me, when I turn around like this."

Then he whirled around, suiting the action to the words. Whisper looked at him for a full minute, then she turned around slowly, never losing her grown-up air.

"Oh! that won't do at all," said Stephen; and he picked her up under her arms, to whirl her around, her feet off the ground.

"Oh," she gasped, "that was fun!" and she giggled.

"If she thinks that's fun," said Bob, "maybe she'd like it if I shook her."

"Bob Root, I think you're the meanest boy alive," Joy said, angrily; "and I won't go with you, or belong to the Colonials, if you are not nice to Whisper."

"Oh! all right," said Bob, grudgingly.

Whisper took her place between Merry and Dandy, and the strange procession went on its way.

Joy led them to the glade where the gypsies had camped the time she ran away with them. It was a broad, open space, surrounded by a grove of old trees; their leaves mottled the brown earth with their shadows in the setting sun. Everybody saw the desirability of the spot. It was getting late, so that they did not linger very long.

Marcia and Edna planned, with the assistance of the Betts, where the booths were to be. Much of the responsibility of the fair rested on their shoulders, and they felt it keenly. Finally Mrs. Root called to them to hurry.

"Meet at our house next," said Mrs. Talcott; "say, day after to-morrow. You may all bring as many ideas as possible. Joy, we look to you to give us gypsy stunts."

After Pam left her, Joy walked home thoughtfully.

"I wish I could think of a plan," she said to her mother after dinner. Clown was in her lap and she stroked his head gently. "Something Mrs. Root would like, and, oh! Mummy, how can I really dance properly without Joe?"

Mrs. Payton was silent for a few minutes. She was very much interested in the fair. She, with Mrs. Root and Mrs. Talcott, and occasionally with Mrs. Winthrop, were on the Board of the Crippled Boys' Home, and she knew they needed the playground they were working for.

"Joy," she said suddenly, "do you think you could find your gypsies?"

"Mummy, what do you mean?" Joy demanded.

"Well," began Flora, "I thought if we had Joe to play for you, and pretty Persa to tell fortunes, it might be a good idea."

"Oh, it's a heavenly idea!" said Joy, borrowing Merry's favorite adjective. "May I call Pam up, and tell her about it?"

"Yes, if you like; and let me speak to Geoffrey."

Pam was delighted with the scheme when Joy reached her on the wire.

"But, Joy, can you ever find them?" she asked, excitedly.

"I think I know a way, but it's a secret," Joy told her. "Of course, I'll tell you. See you first thing in the morning."

Geoffrey Hotchkiss, when he came to the telephone and heard the plan, decided they all needed a day's motoring and said he would be around later that evening to talk it over.

Flora called up Mrs. Root and Mrs. Talcott, both of whom thought the idea of having Persa tell fortunes was splendid; besides, they wanted so much to hear Gypsy Joe play.

Joy listened to the conversations and when her mother had rung off and turned back to her, she said:

"Well, Mummy, maybe in some ways it was dreadful, but in some others it was lucky."

"What was, darling?" Flora asked.

"My running away with the gypsies," Joy said, laughingly.

'Oh, Joy!" was all Flora could reply.

CHAPTER V

PLOTS

"TELL me the secret!" Pam demanded, as she and Joy met at the door of the cottage next morning.

"Haven't time, we are late now," Joy told her; "but be ready to go for a ride after school—oh! a long ride."

"I don't think we had better go for a very long one," Pam replied, doubtfully; "and, anyway, Pops said he'd ride with us this afternoon."

"Of course, that's better still, because I don't know exactly where we're going, or what we'll find when we get there; but I hope lots of things," Joy answered.

"Meany," laughed Pam, "tell me."

"Not a word till after school," Joy replied, firmly.

She was relieved in her own mind that they were to have Mr. Hotchkiss with them, for she was daily becoming more and more of a *Gajo,* and the thought of the expedition in hand made her a little nervous.

School was dull that morning, and Joy missed in spelling twice. Whisper made a mistake in arithmetic, and cried. Joy and Pam felt uncomfortable; they could neither of them imagine shedding a tear over lessons, and Whisper's seriousness was always a marvel to them.

"I am glad to see that my niece at least values education," said Miss York, tartly.

She had a headache, and added to that was the knowledge that she would give almost anything to have Whisper exactly as carefree and joyous as Joy and Pam. She was always denying this to herself, but it was the truth.

Whisper dried her eyes when she found she could name the five New England States and their Capitals without an error.

"Thank goodness, that's over," said Pam with a sigh, when the last book was closed, "and now for the secret. May I come to your house for lunch?"

"Of course, Pam. What a silly thing it is, our living in two houses, anyway, isn't it?" Joy said thoughtfully.

"Oh! Joy, do you know, I have thought of that just oceans of times, but I didn't know you did, too. Wouldn't it be wonderful to live in one house, and have breakfast together

every morning? I'm so tired of just Ellen to talk to when Pops is busy."

"Mummy would have to come, too," said Joy.

"Of course! Don't you see what I mean—I don't want to say it because maybe you wouldn't like it."

"Pam Hotchkiss, I do believe you are thinking the same thing I am!" Joy exclaimed. "Let's both say it together."

"My father to marry your mother!" burst out Pam.

"My mother to marry your father!" cried Joy.

"Oh, wouldn't it be too heavenly for words?" Pam exclaimed. "Joy, let's tell them."

"Oh! no, don't let us do that exactly. You tell Mummy you want to call her 'Mummy' and I'll tell your father that I want to call him 'Pops,' and that will be a hint," Joy explained.

"Yes, and then we could say things about its being silly to have two houses when one would be enough, and what fun it would be to all be together. Then they'll surely get married, and, oh! dear, how scrumptious that would be! Don't let's talk about anything else on the motor trip when we go to find

your gypsies. Joy, it's just *got* to happen!"

Pam danced in the ecstasy of her emotion.

"It will, it will, I just know it was meant to be. Won't it be heavenly having a father!" Joy sighed. "I've always wanted one."

"Not nearly so nice as having a new mother; and, well, you know, Joy, I love your mother next best to Pops, and you," Pam said, "even more than the Colonel."

"I know, so do I," Joy agreed.

They fairly danced home to lunch, and Pam threw her arms around Flora Payton, who met them at the door, and hugged her hard.

"Do you know the mysterious secret?" Flora teased. "Please tell me."

"I don't know the secret you're thinking of, but I know another that is much nicer, and it's about you," Pam replied.

"Oh, tell me, I adore secrets," Flora begged.

"Not yet, Pam," Joy warned.

"All right for you," said the unsuspecting Flora, and she put an arm around each of them and led the way into the dining room.

Pam went home to change into her riding clothes, and she and Geoffrey Hotchkiss called for Joy about two o'clock.

Flora came out to see them off.

"Geoffrey, I must learn to ride," she said,

"I am so envious every time you start off with the youngsters."

"Oh, you'll learn soon," said Joy, so mysteriously that they all looked at her.

"Why, what's going to happen?" Geoffrey asked.

"We can't tell you," said Pam, "but it's awfully nice," she added.

"And it's just got to happen," said Joy, fervently.

They waved good-by until they were out of sight, and then Geoffrey Hotchkiss turned to Joy.

"Now, how do you propose to find your gypsies? Ask the birds and the chipmunks?"

"No," laughed Joy. "If my gypsies were near the birds would tell me about it. I'm afraid you won't like where we're going."

They rode over to the other side of town and on to the main road. This was a departure from the rest of their rides, for they usually kept to the country lanes.

"Lots of motors along here," said Mr. Hotchkiss. "Can't we take a different way?"

"I don't know any other way to go, but maybe, if I told you where we were going you'd know a better one," Joy replied.

"Perhaps. Let's have it anyway. I do like

to know where I am going," Mr. Hotchkiss answered.

"Well, I want to get to the flats that are back of a large town that is near a shallow river," Joy told him. "There's a big bridge before you come to it."

Mr. Hotchkiss named a New Jersey town not far distant, and Joy nodded.

"That's it," she said. "At the end of it there are a lot of little houses, just every old-which-way, quite near a swamp. I want to go there."

"My word! that's a nice spot for an afternoon ride! Do you expect to find the gypsies there?" laughed Mr. Hotchkiss.

"No, but an old tinker I know lives in a house there, and he knows everything. He'll know where Liubo is, I'm sure," Joy told him.

Mr. Hotchkiss led a way through the back roads, for he knew his countryside; and some time afterwards they came in sight of a cluster of little houses, not much more than huts. They lay on the outskirts, between the town and the swamp, a desolate, lonely spot.

"Joy, did you think of coming here alone?" asked Mr. Hotchkiss, aghast.

"Yes," replied Joy, "they are gypsies, you see, and they wouldn't let anything happen to me, especially Toon."

"Who is Toon?" Mr. Hotchkiss asked.

He did not know how to explain to her that this would have been a very dangerous thing to do, without upsetting that sublime faith in her gypsies. After considering for a few minutes, while Joy was telling him that Toon was the tinker, and a friend of Liubo's, Mr. Hotchkiss said gravely:

"Joy, will you promise me never to go and see any of your gypsy friends without first telling me?"

"Why, yes, I'll promise," said Joy, slowly.

She thought to herself that as her future father he had a right to this sort of promise.

A bevy of small, very dirty children came out to greet them as they neared the first house. Some of them began throwing stones, while the others begged for pennies. Joy spoke to them in Romany and they stared, amazed.

From one of the cottages emerged a giant of a man, with a long black beard. He wore a red sash tied about his middle, and his collar was open at the throat.

"Oh! Toon," cried Joy, throwing herself off the pony and going to him.

He did not recognize her at first, for he had not seen her for a couple of years.

"Little gypsy *Gajo!*" he exclaimed, when she had explained who she was; and his manner changed in the twinkling of an eye.

They talked together for a long time, then Joy came back to Geoffrey Hotchkiss.

"Will you write a letter to Liubo for me? It would take me so long to do it," she said.

Geoffrey got out his notebook; but Toon waved it aside, and dashed back into his hut, to return with a box of bright pink note paper. Joy told him what to say, and added to "please, please come" at the end of the note.

Geoffrey had explained that he would pay Persa and Joe to come and play at the Fair, and gave the date. He handed the letter to Toon and would have tipped him, but the gypsy drew back.

"No money from gypsy to gypsy, and the little *Gajo* is a true gypsy, if I ever saw one." He laughed and patted Joy on the head.

The ragged children ran after them as they left, and Geoffrey scattered a liberal supply of nickels and dimes to them.

"That means we can't go on our motor trip. What a shame!" said Pam.

For Toon had told them that one of his friends was going to start off on the trail the next day and would see Liubo before the

end of the week, for the tribe was in camp near Philadelphia.

"Well, we can go motoring, anyway," laughed Geoffrey. "We don't have to hunt gypsies to do that."

"Oh, let's!" exclaimed Joy. "Remember our plan, Pam."

"That's what I was thinking of," Pam replied.

"What is this mysterious plan?" asked her father, amused.

"Secret," laughed Joy.

Next day as soon as school was over, they started off for the promised ride.

"Do you want to ask Merry and Whisper?" Flora asked as they were starting.

"No, we'll leave Clinker and Cricket for them to ride, and they'll like that much better than going," Joy assured her. "We want to go by ourselves to-day."

"Where are we bound?" asked Geoffrey, who was at the wheel of his car.

"Oh, the lake will be lovely with all the autumn foliage," said Flora. "Let's go there."

She was about to take her place beside him, when Joy said:

"Oh, Mummy, please, I want to sit in front with Mr. Hotchkiss, mayn't I?"

And Pam added: "I want to sit with you, Mrs. Payton. Won't you, please?"

Flora and Geoffrey looked at each other and lifted their eyebrows slightly. What under the sun were the children after, was the thought in their minds.

"Now, little Gypsy *Gajo,* as your friend Toon calls you, what's the exciting secret?" Geoffrey demanded as they started off.

"It isn't a secret, really," Joy confessed. "I just want to ask you if you'll let me do something."

"Almost sure to," laughed Geoffrey.

"Well, it's this: may I call you 'Pops?' You see, I haven't any father, and I'd like one, and I love you next best to Mummy and Pam," Joy said all in a breath.

"Joy," said Geoffrey Hotchkiss, gravely, "do you mean that?"

"Of course, I do!" Joy exclaimed. "I mean every bit of it."

"Well, of course, you may call me 'Pops' or anything else you like, and now I'll tell you a secret: I'd rather be your new father than anything else in the world."

"Oh, Pops!" said Joy happily.

She strained her ears to find out what was going on in the back seat, and heard Pam saying:

"But, Mummy, that's not all the secret."

At the lake the girls went off in search of firewood. They had brought a basket of sandwiches with them, and a kettle to make hot water for the tea; Mrs. Payton scorned tea in the Thermos bottle.

When they had disappeared in the woods, Geoffrey came over to Flora and took her hand.

"Mummy," he said, gently, "Joy wants a new father. Won't you let me be the one to take his place?"

Flora put her other hand over his.

"Yes, Geoffrey, if you think I'll make a nice mother for Pam."

"The mother of her dreams, and mine," said Geoffrey, and he kissed her.

CHAPTER VI

THE COLONIALS

JOY and Pam were sitting at their desks waiting for Miss York to close her history book. It was the most important day of their lives, for on that evening Mrs. Payton was giving a dinner, and she and Mr. Hotchkiss were to announce their engagement.

Mrs. Talcott had postponed the meeting for the Fair plans because she declared she needed all day to get ready for the dinner party.

Merry had invited Whisper and Joy and Pam to her house for dinner. There would be no older people present.

"Oh, move, move," said Pam, looking at the clock that stood on the mantle shelf. "Sniffs," she wailed, "the clock has stopped! It's been four-minutes-to-one for ages, and ages."

"Pam," said Miss York, reprovingly, "are you intending to speak like that when you go to Miss Lathrop's?"

"If you do, she'll make you stay in,"

laughed Joy, "like Stephen, remember?"

"And all he did was to miss one question," Pam answered. "Well," she continued cheerfully, "I expect I'll be staying in every day. Joy, you've got to promise me that when I'm bad you'll be bad too, so that we can stay in together."

"That's a good idea," said Joy seriously. "If we are going to be bad—and I suppose we will be—we might as well be bad together, and we'll tell the boys about it, too."

"And that will make staying in rather a lark," said Pam.

"Oh dear," sighed Whisper, "I wish I could have fun being bad."

"Sarah," reproved Miss York, "how can you talk like that?"

"Whisper," said Joy, seriously, "have you ever been naughty in your whole life?"

"Once in school back home I made the chalk squeak on the board. I didn't exactly mean to, but when I heard it make that funny noise I kept on doing it, and I got stood in the corner," Whisper added, proudly.

"Did you cry?" asked Pam.

"Yes," said Whisper, wearily. "I don't know why, but I always cry."

"I don't call that being *very* bad," said Pam.

"No," replied Joy, thoughtfully, "but it shows that Whisper can be naughty if she wants to."

"Part of me wants to all the time," said Whisper, "but the other part won't let me."

"That's the way it is with me, only it's being good," Pam returned.

"Look, there are the boys!" Joy pointed excitedly through the open window. "Can't we go now, please, Sniffs?"

"No, you may not," said Miss York, with sudden firmness. "We will continue the history lesson."

"Oh, bother!" said Pam, but she opened her book.

The dull minutes dragged on till a quarter past one, then they were free to go.

"What do you suppose the boys are doing here at this hour?" Joy asked.

"We'll soon find out," Pam replied.

"Hello! you two," said Bob. "We're in a nice pickle. Mum went to town to-day, and Edna went to Marcia Gordon's. The cook was to give us lunch, and when we got home we found the house all locked up."

"Come on home to lunch with me," Joy invited, hospitably.

"No, come on home to my house," Pam insisted. "Mummy's so busy to-day, she'll be

glad not to have you, and Pops will be awfully happy."

They went with Pam. Mr. Hotchkiss met them at the door.

"What's the delegation?" he inquired, smiling.

"Hello! Pops," said Joy.

They had luncheon in the low-raftered dining room.

"We must do this often," said Mr. Hotchkiss.

"That will be nice," said Bob.

"What are you going to do this afternoon, if I may ask?" Mr. Hotchkiss inquired.

"Let's go over to the Colonel's," suggested Ted.

"It isn't the Sergeant's day off," Joy reminded them.

"That doesn't matter. Mum thinks we ought to tell the Colonel about the Colonials before Monday," Bob put in.

"What are the Colonials?" asked Mr. Hotchkiss.

"A secret society, sir," Ted told him.

"Let's invite Pops to one of the meetings some day," Joy suggested.

"But no one else," Bob reminded her.

"I've got a good idea," said Pam. "Let's give a party at the Colonel's some day, and

ask your mother and father and Mummy and Pops. I'm sure the Colonel wouldn't mind."

"But, Pam, that's not the way to propose things," Bob corrected. "You should wait until we have the meeting and then say: 'Mr. President, I should like to propose a party.' "

"Well, she can do it yet," Ted suggested. "Come on, let's go over."

The Colonel was writing in his study, fighting the war to a successful finish, but he welcomed the children.

"Colonel Tracy," said Bob, who was the spokesman, "we have come to form a club called the 'Colonials'; the object of this club is to make your tea every Monday afternoon."

"And Mother said if you didn't want us you were to shoo us away," Ted added.

"Good heavens!" said the Colonel; but he rose to the occasion.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I am overcome by this honor. Need I say that I will be delighted to have the Colonials meet here on Mondays? Do I understand that I am a member?"

"Oh! you're the President," said Joy.

"Then, as President, I must entertain today. You will stay and be my guests for tea."

"Don't eat much," advised Joy. "Mummy is having just oodles to eat to-night, and you're going, aren't you?"

"I am, indeed," said the Colonel, who already knew Mrs. Payton's secret; "and better news I never heard."

"Mom said to-day she thought Joy and Pam were each pretty lucky—one gets a perfect stepmother, and the other gets a perfect stepfather; and, honest, I don't know which one I'd rather be," Bob exclaimed.

The Sergeant brought tea, and the Colonel, all unknowing, let them drink it. But when Pam asked for a second cup, the Sergeant interfered.

"Colonel, suh, I jes' knows that Missy can't have tea," he said, with a worried expression on his old face. "One cup I 'lows for a treat, but the 'stradinary suggestion for two cups I can't allow."

"My word!" ejaculated the Colonel. "As president of the Colonials, I am very remiss. Next time we will have cocoa."

"Well," said Joy, "I suppose that would be better."

"Now we must go home," said Pam, when the last sandwich had disappeared.

"Not before we write the charter," Bob reminded them. "I'll write it and then we'll

bury it, and years from now and when we are quite grown up, we'll dig it up."

The Colonel supplied the pen, ink and paper, and Bob wrote laboriously:

"Herewith this day in the Year of Our Lord, 1926 A.D., the Colonials are forming a Secret Society, with members consisting of Joyce Payton, Pamela Hotchkiss, Theodore Root, and Robert Root.

"The Colonel is the President hereby, and we, the undersigned, promise never to divulge the Secrets of the said Club.

"We are the undersigned.

COL. JOHN TRACY.
JOYCE PAYTON.
PAMELA HOTCHKISS.
THEODORE ROOT.
ROBERT ROOT."

The Colonel called for a tin box and they laid the document away, sealing the cover down with sealing wax. Ted dug a hole for it, and Bob buried it with befitting solemnity.

"Now, we really must fly," said Joy when the earth had been patted down under the big apple tree.

The boys left them at the gate, and the girls hurried on, to the exciting experience of helping Mrs. Payton to dress.

They did not leave her until she was ready to go downstairs and receive her guests. Her gown was a mauve chiffon, and she wore a string of beautiful pearls. Her hair, as al-

ways, was dressed high on her head, and she looked very lovely.

They both kissed her gingerly and hurried off to Merry's. They were in time to see Mrs. Talcott before she left, looking very pretty in a blue frock that just matched her eyes.

Mr. Talcott came in late, as usual.

"Hello! everybody!" he greeted.

He was a very handsome man, with broad shoulders, and laughing eyes.

"Daddy, you'll simply have to *fly* into your clothes," Merry told him. "The boys have laid everything out for you."

"Thanks. You know, it never takes me more than ten minutes to dress, bath and all," Mr. Talcott replied.

"Oh! Daddy, last time you went to the Roots' it was a whole half hour, and it would be perfectly ghastly if you were late."

"Merry," shouted Dandy from the floor above, "keep still, and tell Father his tub is running."

"Can't possibly go until I have shaken hands with all my daughter's guests. How's my friend Whisper to-day?"

"Oh, I'm very well!" exclaimed Whisper decidedly; "and I helped Mrs. Talcott into her dress, and hooked it up."

"I should say you did," Mrs. Talcott re-

plied, "and anyone cleverer with their fingers I never saw."

"Clever child all around! Expect great things of Whisper."

"Bath water's running."

"Bath water's running."

"Bath water's running."

The Talcott family took up the song until Mr. Talcott put his fingers in his ears.

"Oh! please, sir," said Whisper, "go and take your bath."

In a great bustle the Talcotts got off at last.

"Let's turn on the radio," suggested Dandy.

"Ah! there's nothing on but a bedtime story," said Spruce.

"Then let's play 'Hide and Go Seek,'" Whisper said shyly.

"Old-fashioned, but fun," replied Dandy.

"One of us has to be 'It,' because we know the house. Dandy, it's up to you, and I'll show Pam and Joy where to hide," Spruce directed.

"No fair going in the cellar, and the banisters are home," Dandy reminded them.

They all dashed away, Whisper in the lead. Dandy counted five hundred by fives and then went to look for them. He found Merry first, hiding behind the big couch in the living-

room; Joy next; she was upstairs in a closet; and while he was hunting for her Spruce and Pam ran in free. They had simply walked into the kitchen, up the back stairs and down the front ones, ahead of Dandy.

Then came the hunt for Whisper. She was apparently nowhere to be found. The rest waited while Dandy searched and then as she refused to answer his: "Come in, come in, wherever you are," they helped him.

"She's locked up in an old chest," said Spruce, the imaginative.

"Only we haven't any old chest," said Merry, for the moment practical.

"There's the cedar chest in the attic," Spruce reminded them.

And they all trooped upstairs to see if she could be hiding in that.

"Nothing in it but Mab's old fur coat!" Merry exclaimed. "I'm getting scared."

"Shucks! she's got a good hiding-place and she won't come in until she's found," Spruce declared.

"But where is she, Spruce? We know every corner of this house and she's not in one of them," Dandy demanded.

There was a sudden peal at the bell. Some one had put his finger on it and intended to leave it there till the door was open.

The maid, who was supposed to be keeping an eye on the children, came in from the kitchen.

The doorway revealed Stephen Winthrop, looking positively wild.

"Ladder! Where's a ladder? That girl's hanging onto the roof, too scared to answer me! Maybe she's dead!" he gulped.

The rest rushed to the lawn and looked up where he pointed. The house was low and long and had five gables with dormer windows. Beside one of these windows, lying flat on her face in an almost upright position, was Whisper, her hands clutching the shingle roof.

"One step, and she could get into the house!" Spruce exclaimed. "I'll go up to the window."

With Joy and Pam following him, he went up to Merry's room and leaned out.

"Whisper, can you take a step this way?" he asked, peering around the side of the window.

"Oh! I can't!" came in a strangled voice; and Spruce saw that the child was white with terror.

"Keep your nerve, and we'll get you! Don't move, if you are afraid to," he told her.

Stephen found a ladder in the garage, and the rest helped him carry it to the house.

Upstairs Joy was half in and half out of the window.

"Are you terribly scared, Whisper, dear?" she asked.

"Joy, I'm slipping!" came Whisper's voice, still strangled, and almost inarticulate.

"I'm coming out with you," said Joy, and out she went in spite of Pam's protest, just as the others came in sight of the house with the ladder.

"Joy, get back there!" shouted Dandy; but climbing came easy to Joy, who was used to trees; and high places gave her a sense of elation, never making her dizzy.

There was a foot of roof beyond the dormer, and she walked along it until she was next to Whisper, then she put her arm around her and held her.

Whisper's eyes were shut tight. She had come out, thinking the roof would be a good place to hide, and had suddenly grown dizzy.

Stephen put the ladder in place, and scrambled up it; then came the greatest difficulty of all, for Whisper refused to move.

"I can't!" was all she would say, tho' Spruce from the window ordered, and Joy beside her begged.

Meanwhile Merry was absent. She was not

in the house with the rest in her room, nor was she on the ground. Pam looked for her in the kitchen where the maids sat, their aprons over their heads, absolutely useless.

"Joy, we've got to get her down," said Stephen from the top of the ladder. "You take her wrists, and I'll take her feet and we'll slide her down till she touches the first rung."

"I'm stronger than she is," answered Joy, and she started tugging at her wrists.

Whisper gave a little choking sob and doubled up in a dead faint, so that Joy and Stephen had to use their utmost strength so as to keep her from falling.

Just at this time Merry came tearing up the drive, with Mr. Talcott in his car. She had taken matters into her own hands and gone for him, sending Jane into the living-room so as not to create a disturbance, and spoil the party.

It was deep twilight when Mr. Talcott, with Stephen's able assistance, carried Whisper down the ladder. He would have gone back for Joy, but she had climbed nimbly through the window, assisted by Dandy's eager arms.

They laid Whisper out on the grass and she came to after a minute or so, to stare up at the frightened face of Mr. Talcott.

"I'm not up there any more, am I?" she said, rather than asked.

"No, thanks to Joy and Stephen, you are safe on *terra firma,*" Mr. Talcott assured her. "But Whisper, what made you do it in the first place?"

"I thought it would be a good place to hide," said Whisper. "Oh! dear!" She gave a long, shuddering sob, and burst into tears.

Mr. Talcott went back eventually to the dinner party. He told what had happened, and the remarks were characteristic.

"That little trump!" they said of Joy—all but her mother, who put her hand over her heart as if to still it.

"I'll have my work cut out for me, I can see that," her future father said, with pride.

"Oh! dear, I do wish Stephen had been a girl," said the foolish little Mrs. Winthrop.

"Proud of the boy!" grumbled her husband.

"Merry showed a spark of sense," said Mrs. Talcott.

"Won't the twins be thrilled!" said the Roots.

"Poor little Whisper!" said the Colonel.

At the Talcotts', dinner was being eaten hungrily by every one, including Whisper.

CHAPTER VII

JOE

IF you had asked the squirrels and the birds that nested in the glade what had come over it of late, they would have shaken their heads in despair, and told you that never in the history of their summers was there such a bustle and confusion. They were used to the lazy activities of the gypsies, and rather welcomed them each year; but this busy hum was something quite different. Hammers went by day, and lights were switched on and off at night, until the squirrels, one by one, deserted it, and the birds moved south earlier than usual.

"I ate it, I hate it!" said Joy. "I'd never know it was mine, with all these tables and things."

"I know," said Merry, sympathetically. "I'd have felt that way about the Forest of Arden if they had decided to have a Fair there."

"I think it's wonderful," said Whisper.

"Well, I don't like it, if Joy doesn't!" exclaimed Pam.

The twins were arranging a hutch for rabbits.

They were standing in the middle of the clearing, under the red and gold trees, and on all sides of them some one was doing something.

The twins were arranging a hutch for rabbits; the Talcott boys were busy with the pie table; while Edna and Marcia were in sole charge of the candy booth.

The Fair was to open that afternoon at two o'clock. It was eleven in the morning now, and as yet there had been no news of Joy's gypsies.

"Maybe they didn't get the letter," Pam said, helpfully.

"Don't say that," said Joy. "I know they are coming."

"Well, we might as well help," Merry began. "Let's go over and see those heavenly kittens."

She went over to a basket full of tiny jet black kittens. They had been discovered at a farmer's house not far off, and Mrs. Talcott, who adored cats, had brushed their coats and tied orange bows around their necks.

"Father went to Princeton—that's why they're orange," Merry explained. "We're going to keep all the ones that are not sold."

"I like dogs better," said Pam. "I wish

Pops would buy me one of these adorable puppies."

Ted heard the remark.

"Pam Hotchkiss," he exclaimed, "I told you you didn't really like dogs, or you'd be true to your own, and not want to have a whole lot of them."

"But I can love two dogs just as well as one. Don't be silly," said Pam.

"You cannot—not really," insisted Ted. "None of the Roots would have another dog after Annabel Lee."

"I know how you feel," said Joy, "but I think you're silly, too. I could have ten dogs and love them all, but of course I could not love any of them as I do Clown."

"There, you see," Bob answered her. "That's what Ted means. It's not fair to have a dog unless you love him best."

At this point of the argument a dilapidated looking individual strolled into the camp. He had a mongrel pup with him and was leading him by a rope tied around his neck.

"Say, bo," he began, "where de loidy what buys de dawgs?"

The dog made it impossible for either Bob or Ted to reply. He dashed from one to the other, barking and yapping and trying to

jump up and lick their faces. At first, Bob and Ted said: "Down, sir!" sternly, but after a few seconds they were down on their knees patting the dog.

Mrs. Talcott and Mrs. Root strolled up.

"What's all this?" demanded Mrs. Talcott.

"Are youse de loidy what buys de dawgs?" the tramp demanded.

"Do you call that a dog?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am, dat's a werry fine dawg," the man replied. "He wuz give to me by a party what owes me sixty cents."

Mrs. Root looked at the tramp, looked at the dog, thin almost to the point of emaciation, looked at the twins, and said abruptly:

"I'll give you one dollar for him."

"Oh! Mum," said Ted.

"There's Annabel Lee," said Bob, "we swore we'd never have another dog."

Mrs. Root looked at them; her face was as serious as their own.

"I don't think Annabel would mind, boys," she said. "Take him home and give him a bath."

"Our house is lots nearer," said Pam. "You can give him a bath in our laundry tubs."

"But there's Soncy; they might fight," Ted reminded them.

"Guess we'd better take him home," Bob said. "You can come with us if you like."

Merry and Whisper decided the Fair could not spare them, so the Colonials went off alone.

In bathing the dog they all got thoroughly drenched, but it was worth it.

"I think he's a pointer," Bob said, thoughtfully.

"He looks something like a fox terrier, but he's much too big;" and there was doubt in Ted's voice.

"Do feed him," begged Joy. "He looks awfully hungry."

They gave him milk, and quantities of bread, and the cook was induced to part with a bone originally intended for soup.

"He's a darling lamb," said Pam, "and I think he's going to love Soncy."

So busy were they that Joy almost forgot her gypsies, but the thought of them ran in the back of her mind.

They returned to the Fair at two o'clock. Already the road was lined with automobiles. There was a crowd around the Animal Booth, and Stephen Winthrop, who was in charge of it, called to the twins to hurry up and help.

Joy and Pam went off to look up Mrs.

Payton. They found her at the Library Booth, and stayed to wrap up packages.

Joy was going to dance at four o'clock. It was three now, and still no sign of Joe.

Mrs. Payton took her home to dress. Her costume was of flowered calico, and she looked the gypsy but for her bobbed hair.

"But who's going to play for me?" asked Joy, when she had returned to the Fair, and stood in the center of a rudely constructed platform, a group of eager faces around it.

"Don't worry about the music," Mr. Hotchkiss replied. "We'll start up the music the minute you say the word.

"All right," said Joy listlessly. "I'm ready."

From a clump of bushes near by came the soft notes of a violin, the music that Joe always played for Joy's dance, a brave, gay air with minor notes of pathos. Joy listened, on the alert at once. Who was daring to play Joe's music and to play it so like Joe? The only person she knew who could play the violin was Stephen Winthrop. She looked around for him, but he was not to be seen, so she jumped to the conclusion that it was he, and began to dance. Back and forth she swayed, like a flower tossed by the wind,

and the music grew more and more familiar.

"It must be Joe, it must be Joe," sang in Joy's heart; but her mind kept saying: "It's Stephen, it's Stephen."

The dance over, there was tumultuous applause. All the women wanted to kiss Joy, which bothered her. She said, "Thank you," in a sort of a daze, her eyes on the clump of bushes. She saw Mr. Hotchkiss go over to it, and then, wonder of wonders, Joe appeared. He was scowling, his violin tucked under his arm, the bow held carelessly on one finger. He came forward reluctantly.

"Oh! Joe!" Joy screamed, and dashed toward him, "you really came!"

Joe smiled at her, but it was a cross smile.

"Liubo made me," he said. "I didn't want to come."

"Oh, Joe, didn't you?" and Joy's face fell.

Joe caught the hint of tears in her voice and looked crosser than ever.

"To see you is one thing," he said, "but to play for a lot of gaping *Gajos*—I hate it."

Joy brightened.

"Don't be a crosspatch," she said. "Come and see Mummy and the Colonel and Pam."

They walked through the crowd, hand in hand. People stared at them; they all knew Joy's history.

"Flora Payton," Mrs. Root was saying, as they neared the Library Booth, "something must be done about that boy. He's a genius, I tell you."

"Isn't he the most romantic figure?" lisped Mrs. Winthrop.

"And who's the pretty, pretty girl who came with him?" asked Mrs. Talcott.

Joy heard her.

"Oh, is Persa here?" she exclaimed, and looked across the clearing to see a crowd around a tent that had been erected for the fortune-teller.

Persa made much money that afternoon and regretfully turned it over to the Fair, but the chief attraction was Joe and his violin. The Fair turned into a concert, and Joe grudgingly accepted a personal gift to help him with his studies.

There was a buffet dinner served at the Fair and almost everybody stayed to it.

Joe, with Joy and Pam and Spruce Talcott, took their dinner a little ways off from the glade. For some curious, inexplicable reason, the boys got on famously, Spruce with his joking manner, and Joe with his deep scowl—one seemed to admire the other. As for the rest of the boys, Joy had introduced Joe to, he disliked them all. They were *Gajos*. If

Spruce were a *Gajo* too, Joe forgot it and remembered only that he liked his handsome, quizzical face; and they had sworn eternal friendship.

"Hasn't it been perfectly wonderful?" said Pam.

"Yes. I say, Joe, won't you think over that offer of the Colonel's, and come and live here?" begged Spruce.

"What would a gypsy do living in a house?" Joe inquired. "No, I'm a gypsy, and I will be a gypsy always," he said with finality.

"Oh!" sighed Joy, "wouldn't it be too heavenly for words if you were a *Gajo!*"

Some of the other children, curious, wandered over to join them, and Joe turned his back on the group.

Persa, unlike Joe, was thoroughly enjoying herself. Gypsy-like, she was accepting everything that came her way, and telling marvelous tales about gypsy life.

At nine o'clock Flora said to Geoffrey:

"I'm going to take the children home to bed. Pam is staying with Joy to-night."

"Oh, Mummy, please let us stay until Spruce auctions off the bunnies," Pam begged.

"All right, but then after that we are going straight home," said Flora.

Spruce got up on the platform, a

bunny held by the ears in either hand.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he greeted the crowd, "doesn't anybody want these poor, homeless rabbits? Isn't there a kindly heart in the whole of Birchwood that will adopt one of these orphans, and bring him up with his dog and cat? Be merciful! Think of their end if you turn away in cold blood—tied in a gunnysack, a brick in the bottom, and these two, poor, harmless rabbits plunged to the depth of some feelingless lake, while they squirm and wiggle, and finally drown."

"Oh, Spruce, do stop!" gasped Mrs. Talcott, between laughter and tears.

"Oh, give them both to me," cried Mrs. Winthrop, "and don't say another word."

"But, Mother," protested Stephen, "I don't want a couple of rabbits."

"Selfish boy! I'm not buying them for you; I'm buying them for myself," Mrs. Winthrop opened her red leather bag and took out a bill. "You take them home, Stephen."

"I knew it," Stephen growled, and he took the two bunnies none too gently from Spruce, who whispered:

"Does Stevie want the ikle bikle bunnies? Well, he shall have them, so he shall."

And then Stephen said gruffly: "I've half a notion to break your neck!"

So the Fair ended, for the children at least.

Joy said good-by to Joe and Persa, as they were starting back that same night, for it was broad moonlight.

"I won't see you all winter," Joy said, disconsolately; "but you'll surely be here in the spring."

"Liubo says so," said Joe.

"Give my love to Mother Ia and Liubo and George and Sybil, Persa," Joy said in parting.

That night when she and Pam were almost asleep in adjoining rooms, with the door open between, Joy called out:

"Pam, what are you thinking of?"

"Oh! a lot of things," Pam called back. "Whisper, and how happy she was when her pies were sold; Merry, the way she cried at Spruce's funny speech; and how nice Spruce was to Joe. What were you thinking of?"

"Oh!" said Joy, drowsily, "I was thinking of how nice Joe was to Spruce."

CHAPTER VIII

SNOWBOUND

A MONTH slipped by and with the coming of December came the first hard snowstorm.

The "Kick the Can" Club was disbanded, and the C. and S.S. Club was found. This was the Coasting and Snow-Shoeing Club. The only change was that Stephen Winthrop was elected president because, as Spruce said:

"He's a giddy hero, and, anyway, we are going away to boarding school, so it wouldn't be fair for me to be president any longer."

"Maybe they weren't going to make you president, Sprucey," suggested Merry.

"I was, anyhow," said Pam, "and I think we ought to make Joy vice president."

"But Joy's a girl?" protested Dandy.

"Well, what if she is?" Merry exclaimed. "I think a girl vice president would be heavenly."

"She's as much a heroine as I am a hero," said Stephen, doubtfully.

"Oh, I don't want to be vice president," Joy protested. "I'd simply hate it."

"Thank goodness, that's settled," Spruce sighed. "Better make one of the Root twins vice president. Andy Betts is going to boarding school, too."

"Gee! I wish I were," said Stephen.

"Stephen is going to stay home, and play with his ickle, bickle bunnies," Spruce teased.

"Ah," said Stephen, "let up, will you?"

"Have to do something to get even with you for your hero stuff," Spruce replied.

"All very well," said Stephen, "the next time you say it I'm going to punch you hard."

Andy Betts thought it was time to change the subject.

"You came from New England, didn't you, Whisper?" he asked.

"Oh! yes," Whisper murmured, "Vermont."

"Did you ever do any coasting up there?" Jack went on, condescendingly.

"Oh, no, never on a sled," Whisper replied. "But I've coasted," she said, blushing furiously.

"What did you coast on?" asked Ted.

He was sitting with Tramp's head on his knee. What he really wanted to know was,

who was going to be vice president, but he wouldn't have asked for the world.

"We coasted on tin trays. It's ever so exciting, but I suppose sleds are more fun," replied Whisper.

"Oh, trays! How perfectly heavenly!" exclaimed Merry. "Spruce, can't we coast on trays?"

"Ask the president," said Spruce.

"Sure. I think trays would be fun," said Stephen, "but where are we going to get them?"

They were at Pam's house, in the play room. Outside the snow was falling heavily.

"I don't think we have any tin trays; I'll go and ask Jane," Pam said.

She left the room, to return in a few minutes.

"The only one we have is on legs and Ellen says they just won't come off," she told them.

"We have some at our house," Merry put in, "one in the kitchen, and one in the butler's pantry, and I know perfectly well Mabs will let us have them."

"Come on over and let's coast on our hill, anyway," said Spruce. "It's short, but it's awfully steep."

The Betts decided they'd have to go home

and ask permission, and they left ahead of the rest.

Pam tapped gently at her father's study door.

"Pops," she called, "will you telephone Mummy that Joy is going with me to the Talcotts'?"

"Going out in this blizzard?" asked "Pops," who was deep in his writings. "Won't the wind be too much for you?"

"Oh! no, it will be fun," Pam replied.

At the gate they all stopped, while Whisper wrung a doubtful permission from her aunt.

"We must telephone Mum, too," Edna said. She was talking with Marcia Gordon.

"Do that at our house," Dandy replied.

At first it was fun buffeting against the gale. The snow was steadily piling up as the snowflakes were driven to the earth by the raging wind.

"Oh dear," sighed Whisper, "I think we are going to have a blizzard."

"What do you say, Joy?" Bob panted.

Joy was out of breath, and terribly tired.

"I don't know a thing about snow," she said, "but I think the wind's going to keep on blowing."

"This is awful!" exclaimed Marcia, almost

crying, for the wind had a cutting bite, and it was very cold.

"I'm tired," said Pam.

"Give us your hand and I'll help you along," Spruce said. "Here, Joy, you hang onto the other one. Dandy, you help Marcia, and Stephen grab Edna. Twins, you look after Whisper and Merry."

The boys tugged, and the girls did their best to keep their feet. One extra vicious blast sent Whisper and her escort tumbling into the snowbank.

Mrs. Talcott was at the window when they reached the Talcott house. She ran and opened the door for them.

"Hurry and come in! You must be frozen to death, children!" she exclaimed. "Whatever possessed you to come out in such weather? I just telephoned Mr. Hotchkiss to keep you there, and I nearly had a fit when I heard you had started. Now, take off those wet things, and get around the fire."

"Oh! Mabs, it's perfectly ghastly out, and I know my hands are frozen!" Merry exclaimed. "How will they all get home tonight? They'll all be smothered in the snow —and may we have the tin trays to coast on?"

"Merry!" thundered Dandy.

"Mabs, couldn't we please have some hot

cocoa?" Spruce asked. "Pam looks as if she were frozen inside as well as out."

"Of course, dear. Just a minute and I'll see Mary, and you children had all better telephone home. No, I'll do it for you."

Suddenly Bob jumped up in the air.

"Ted," he exclaimed, "Tramp isn't here! We'll have to go back for him."

"Who's Tramp?" demanded Mrs. Talcott.

"Our new dog. Oh! we can't lose him. Edna, what shall we do?"

"But you can't go out in this storm, children, I won't hear of it. Where did you come from?" Mrs. Talcott asked.

"We were over at Pam's," Edna replied. "Oh! Mrs. Talcott, please let us go. We've simply got to find that dog."

"Telephone Pops, and see if he stayed at home. I don't remember his following us," Pam said.

Bob went to the 'phone.

"No, Edna, you do it. I simply can't. If he should say he wasn't there, I'd just die."

Edna called up Mr. Hotchkiss.

"Oh! Mr. Hotchkiss, is our dog there?" they heard her ask.

Bob and Ted waited, shivering.

"Thank you ever so much," she ended, and Mrs. Talcott took the 'phone.

"Tramp is having tea with Mr. Hotchkiss and Soncy. He's been there all the time," Edna whispered, and Mrs. Talcott said:

"Geoffrey, I'm just going to keep Pam and Joy here all night if this keeps up. Well, I don't know just how, but we'll manage. Will you let Miss York know about Whisper? Oh! and you will let Flora know, too. Yes, of course I quite understand," and she hung up the receiver, laughing.

Next she called up Mrs. Root, and told her her brood were all safe, including the dog. Then she got in contact with Mrs. Winthrop, who did not even know Stephen was out.

"That woman!" said Mrs. Talcott to herself.

"Now, if Daddy were only home," she said, as she left the telephone, "what a lark we could have! I suppose all the trains will be late, and he will almost freeze to death in one of those awful cars."

"Mabs," sighed Dandy, "can't we please have that hot cocoa?"

"Oh! my darling, of course; here it comes now, although I don't remember telling Mary a word about it."

Mary came in, beaming, with a well-laden tray.

"Miss Jerry," she said—for Geraldine was

Mrs. Talcott's first name, and Mary was an old family servant—"what are you going to do with them all?"

"Goodness only knows, Mary, but we will have to put them up somehow. There's the guest-room bed and the davenport in the sewing room."

"And there's the couch in your dressing room," suggested Mary. "You'll have to do considerable doubling up."

"Oh, there's loads of room!" exclaimed Merry, excitedly. "Won't it be simply heavenly!"

"Stop!" exclaimed Spruce. "I hear a train. Oh, I do hope Dad is on it."

"Let's turn on the Victor and dance," suggested Dandy. "I'd say a game of 'Hide and Go Seek,' but I'm afraid Whisper might go out of the window again, and this time we'd lose her in a snowbank."

"Oh, I never would again," Whisper assured him in little gasps.

"Let's play 'Hide and Go Seek.' It's lots more fun than dancing," said Bob.

"All right, 'Bobolink,'" laughed Mrs. Talcott, "'Hide and Seek' it is, and I'll be 'It'. That big chair is hunk."

They ran all over the house. Mrs. Talcott stood at the window counting, while she wor-

ried about her husband. She was just going to call: "Coming, ready or not," when she heard a tramping on the front steps. She went to the door and opened it. There stood Mr. Talcott, his arm through Mr. Root's.

"Hello, Jerry," he greeted. "I brought this weary man home with me. He's just getting over a terrible cold and this blizzard has about done him up."

They followed Mrs. Talcott into the living room, and she waved them both speechlessly into two chairs. Then she sat down weakly and began to laugh.

"What's the joke?" demanded Mr. Talcott.

"Oh! forgive me, but it's all too ridiculous!" she exclaimed.

"Well, tell us about it," put in Tom Root.

"Tell you! I'll show you," said Mrs. Talcott, and she went to the door.

"Come in, come in, wherever you are," she called, almost hysterically.

The men looked up in surprise when the clatter of heavy shoes was heard all over the house.

"What is this—a stampede?" asked Mr. Talcott, as he heard them coming down the stairs.

"Worse than that; they are our guests for the night," Mrs. Talcott replied.

"By gad!" exclaimed Mr. Root. "No wonder you laughed! Hello, family," he greeted his children as they rushed upon him.

"Oh, how heavenly!" gasped Merry. "Now if Mr. Hotchkiss and Mrs. Payton were only here too!"

"Merry, stop," laughed Mrs. Talcott. "Do you want the house to burst?"

They played the wild game of "Hide and Go Seek" until dinner-time. The dining-room table had been pushed into a corner and Mary put on a big bowl of soup, and everybody helped themselves. Then came a chicken that just went around, and was supplemented by a Spanish omelette.

"Though what we are going to have for breakfast!" Mary exclaimed, "I'm sure I don't know."

After dinner they played charades, and laughed so hard that they were all thoroughly tired out by nine o'clock.

"Now comes the question of bed," said Mrs. Talcott. "Tom," she said to Mr. Root, "we'll give you the sofa in the living room. Boys, we will push your twin beds together and three of you can sleep crosswise, or, better still, one of you and the twins. Dandy, that's you. Spruce, you and Stephen sleep in the

sewing room on the davenport. Now for the girls. Do help me somebody."

"The guest room bed is wide," suggested Mr. Talcott.

"That's right, three of them can sleep in that," said Mrs. Talcott.

"Oh! let Joy and Pam and me," said Merry.

"We can take Whisper with us in Merry's bed," Marcia suggested.

"No, that's only three-quarter. You'd be terribly uncomfortable," objected Mrs. Talcott.

"We can put Whisper to bed on the chaise lounge in your dressing room," Mr. Talcott settled it. "Look, the poor child is almost asleep now," and he picked Whisper up in his arms and carried her upstairs.

The house did not quiet down before ten o'clock when the last good night had been yelled from room to room.

Mr. Talcott looked at Mrs. Talcott and laughed.

"And I always thought we had a big family," he said.

"Bless them," replied Mrs. Talcott, "I wish they were all ours."

"Yes," agreed Mr. Talcott, "especially Whisper."

CHAPTER IX

THE SNOW FIGHT

EARLY the next morning the telephone began to ring. Mrs. Root was the first one to call up.

"When my husband called me on the 'phone this morning," she explained, "he didn't give me a chance to speak to you. I wanted to tell you to send the children along. You must be eaten out of house and home."

"Well, that is a help," agreed Mrs. Talcott, "but will they be able to walk that far? The snow is inches deep."

"I never thought of that," came Mrs. Root's worried voice on the wire. "Perhaps on empty tummies it wouldn't be good for them."

"Tell you what I'll do," said Mrs. Talcott after a pause, "I'll just send them all over to Flora's. She will love having them. That's much nearer."

She hung up, and before she had a chance to call up Flora, the telephone bell jingled again.

"Good morning, Jerry," Flora called, "how are the children?"

"Oh! Flora, my hotel is closing down for lack of provisions. Can you help?" asked Mrs. Talcott.

"Of course I can. That's why I called you up. Patrick is digging a path to the road and the plow has been through. Ship them all over to me, and come yourself. Your maids must need a rest."

"It's an awful imposition, descending on you like this," Jerry protested, "but we will come, and thanks a lot."

The children had been standing around, waiting to hear the results.

"Everybody, get ready to go out. Have you all got galoshes?" asked Mrs. Talcott.

There was a shout of "Yes," and a rough and tumble fight for coats. Then they started down the steep hill that led from the Talcotts' place. They floundered in the snow, but nobody was energetic enough to have a snowball fight because they were all hungry.

Flora Payton met them at the door.

"Come in, my stranded mariners. Breakfast is ready," she said.

"Oh, welcome news!" exclaimed Spruce. "Right here and now, I would like to say that I don't believe in a constitutional before breakfast."

"Wait till we pack this down, and the coasting will be great!" Bob exclaimed.

"Oh, Mummy, we had a wonderful time, but it's awfully nice to be home!" said Joy.

"I wish Pops were here," sighed Pam.

They moved toward the dining room.

"Oh, what a heavenly smell of bacon!" Merry cried.

"And pop-overs, as I live!" added Dandy.

"I must say I like visiting!" declared Stephen.

"What do you think about it all, Whisper?" Mrs. Talcott inquired.

"Oh! I had a grand time," Whisper murmured.

"I wonder if there will be school to-day, Marcia began.

"Wouldn't it be gorgeous if there weren't?" Edna replied.

They fell to eating eagerly; then Ted said solemnly:

"Colonials, it's Thursday."

"Well, what of it?" Bob asked.

"I'll tell you later," said Ted, with his mouth full.

Bob pushed his chair back from the table and sighed.

"I can't eat another pop-over. I wish I

could, but I just can't,—I'm stuffed," he said.

"Bobbie," reproved Edna, "what a thing to say!"

"Don't scold him, Edna," laughed Mrs. Payton. "He is really a compliment to his hostess," and she went back to her conversation with Mrs. Talcott.

"You really must have been dumbfounded when Tom came in with Robert," she was saying.

"Hist! Colonials, meet me in the library." Ted left the table and beckoned from the doorway.

"I'm coming, too," said Spruce.

"No, you're not," Bob denied. "The Colonials are a secret society."

"And there are only four members, and that is all we are going to have!" Ted declared.

The other three nodded.

"All right for you." Spruce laughed, and turned back to his seventh pop-over.

Bob and Ted, with Joy and Pam, went into the library and closed the doors.

"Why must we go to the Colonel's to-day, Ted?" Pam asked. "It isn't Monday."

"But the Sergeant is going out to-day, he told me so. I met him down in the village yesterday. He said he had changed his day

this week because he was invited to a wedding."

"Oh, then, we've simply got to go, but what shall we do with the rest?" Joy asked.

"Maybe we'll all have to go to school," Bob suggested, dolefully.

"Let's find out what their plans are, then we can make ours," Joy decided.

When they went out in the hall, Mrs. Talcott was telephoning Miss Lathrop.

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that," they heard her say. "Then you won't expect the children until to-morrow morning at nine o'clock." The rest was drowned in a cheer of triumph.

"Now, what are you going to do?" asked Mrs. Payton, and just then there was a loud peal at the doorbell. They opened the door and the Betts boy came in.

"Hello, Andy," called Bob. "I suppose you've come to tell us there isn't going to be any school."

Andy Betts stood in the hall and panted. He was fat, and the exertion of walking up the hill made his cheeks look like two red apples.

"Naw, I've got something more important to tell you than that."

"Tell us," said Mrs. Talcott, brushing the snow off his coat.

"The trains aren't running," Harold told them. "The men are all at the Country Club. They want us to come over and help them, ladies too."

"Help them do what?" demanded Flora Payton.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you." Andy shuffled from one foot to another. He had never spoken to such a large audience before. "They're going to have a fight."

"Who? Where?" gasped Mrs. Talcott and Mrs. Payton together.

"All of them at the Club," Andy returned, impatiently.

"What are they fighting about?" Mrs. Talcott asked, hopelessly.

"For fun," Andy replied.

"Child, if you don't tell us what you are talking about," Mrs. Payton announced, "I'll shake you," and the rest laughed.

"Can't you understand?" Andy insisted. "They're going to have a snowball fight, and they want us to help make the forts. The married men against the bachelors."

"Goodness me! I thought at least they were going to have a prize fight!" gasped Mrs. Talcott.

"Well, I expect we'd better go," said

Flora. "Children, can you ever find your own clothes?"

"Can we? Watch us," Dandy replied. "Hurrah for the married men!"

They plowed through the snow, knee-deep in the drift, and found the whole countryside assembled at the Club.

Mrs. Root greeted them.

"Children, come in and be kissed," she called, "and never leave your doting mother again."

"Oh, Mum, we had a wonderful time!" said the twins, embarrassed at being kissed in public.

"But we missed you awfully," said Ted.

"Where's Father?" asked Edna.

"Out with the married men, making their fort. The Colonel and Geoffrey Hotchkiss are in command," said Mrs. Root.

"But the Colonel isn't married," Joy protested.

"He was once, years ago," replied Mrs. Root.

"Oh! thank goodness!" Pam exclaimed. "I didn't see what the Colonials would do if Pops and Mr. Root were on one side and the Colonel on the other."

"Mum," said Bob, "is that why the Colonel looks so sad sometimes?"

"Reckon it is, son," answered Mrs. Root.

The children went out and found their respective fathers and were set to work digging trenches or else constructing breastworks made of huge snowballs. By luncheon time they had a perfect battlefield laid out. Everybody stayed to luncheon at the Club. The battle was scheduled for two o'clock.

At a quarter of two something happened. Freddy Long, who was in command of the bachelors, approached the married men as they were finishing their fort, waving a white flag.

"We want to parley," he said.

The Colonel drew himself up and saluted.

"Proceed," he commanded, his eyes twinkling.

"We claim that you have some of our Army on your side."

"And who are they?" demanded the Colonel.

"The two Talcott boys, the Root twins, and Andy Betts, and Stephen Winthrop."

"What!" roared the Colonel. "Back to your lines, sir, or I'll send you back from the mouth of a cannon."

"Aw, Colonel, have a heart! Lend us the boys. We are so few and you are so many, the odds aren't even," Freddy begged.

The Colonel seemed to consider.

"I will consult my fellow officers," he said at last, and retired into a cold but comfortable dugout.

Mr. Root, Mr. Talcott and Mr. Hotchkiss were stretching their lame backs. Mr. Root was even considering retiring to the Club veranda.

The Colonel told them the bachelors' claim, and they laughed uproariously.

"Let the boys choose," suggested Geoffrey Hotchkiss.

To the everlasting chagrin of their respective fathers, the boys, flattered by the offer, accepted the enemies' terms, and filed over to the opposite trenches. Only Bob and Ted remained loyal, and they did it because they were Colonials.

At two o'clock Mrs. Talcott dropped a red flag, and then fled for her life. The battle was on.

The girls behind the rear line passed up snowballs as fast as they could make them. Some of the mothers went over to the enemy, who had all the unmarried girls in the Club to help them.

Things were going badly for the married men, when the Colonel decided it was time to reconnoiter.

The clubhouse was built on a hill. The

battle was taking place on the golf course. At the right of the two trenches was a bunker, now a high snowdrift.

The Colonel picked out Joy and Pam, who had been in the front ranks fighting with the best of them, and led them around back of the bunker to the end nearest the enemies' fort. Once there they began pelting them at close range. The bachelors at first did not understand; then Duncan Betts, uncle of Andy, saw the tip of Joy's red Barri cap, for she had ventured farther than the rest. He told Freddy Long about it and they stole along their fort until they came to the bunker. Then, when the Colonel was looking the other way, they made a dash for it, captured Joy, and ran back to their own fort.

"We've captured your mascot," Freddy Long shouted. "Will you cry Pax?"

The married men held a consultation and decided to go over the top. They filled their arms full of snowballs, and at the given word from the Colonel, climbed over their breastworks and stormed the enemy's front line. They brought Joy back in triumph, and the battle by mutual consent was over.

Everybody stayed at the Club that night for dinner, and after dinner the biggest surprise of all came. A jingle of bells and a

stamp of horses' feet were heard outside.

Mr. Hotchkiss rose to make a speech.

"There are two barges outside to take us for a little drive around the town. I don't know about the enemy, but I know our side is sleepy."

They piled into the two big sleighs, filled with straw, and were driven down through the town, everybody singing lustily. They serenaded the Gordons, because Mrs. Gordon's bad cold had kept them home. Marcia got out and bade good night to every one.

They went from house to house, dropping a load at each door, until only the Talcotts, the Roots, the Paytons, the Hotchkisses, who included Whisper, were left.

"Let's drive around some more," suggested Geoffrey Hotchkiss, and the others agreed with him.

Joy was sleepy. She snuggled up close to her mother.

"Oh, Mummy," she whispered happily, "it's ever so much more fun being a *Gajo* than being a gypsy!"

CHAPTER X

WHISPER

CHRISTMAS vacation came, which meant daily meetings for the C. and S. S. Club, morning and afternoon.

This morning some of the members were gathered at the Winthrops' because they lived near the steepest hill. All kinds of sleds were in evidence, little ones that you could get a running start with, big ones for two and three people, and one bob. The Talcotts' owned the latter and only boys were allowed to ride on it. Mrs. Talcott said she would be responsible for the boys in a spill, but not for the girls. Naturally, all the girls in the village were crazy to be allowed to ride on it.

"I think it's mean," said the venturesome Pam. "I wouldn't hurt myself any more than the boys would. Spruce, please take me down just once."

"Guess not, Pam. You wouldn't take me into the Colonials, so now we are even."

"Oh! Spruce, I'd gladly let you into it, but Bob and Ted want to keep it a secret for just

us four; but I'd like to have you in—no, I wouldn't, because you'd laugh, and I would hate that."

"Just tell me what it's all about. I won't laugh," Spruce teased.

He had on a new lumberman's jacket, and the older girls, because he looked so grown-up and handsome, were making quite a fuss about him. In fact, this morning, having been asked to a dance by a girl of fifteen, Spruce felt that there was no limit to his charm, and he determined to prove it by Pam.

"Please tell me," he begged. "I won't let on to a soul."

Pam looked at him. She was seriously upset, for she adored Spruce, but she couldn't break a promise.

"I can't," she said, simply. "I vowed, a very solemn vow too, and I can't break it; they'd never forgive me."

Spruce slapped her on the back.

"Good for you, Pam," he said. "I was just teasing to see if you would. You're a much better sport than the older girls. Anyhow, I like you, and I'd take you down on my bob if I hadn't promised Mabs that I wouldn't take any girls," he told her seriously, as Merry joined them.

"What are you two talking about?" she inquired. "Spruce, you remember what you said at breakfast you were going to ask Pam? Well, I'll ask her if you like."

"What is it?" Pam demanded, half-heartedly; she didn't want the subject of the Colonials opened again.

"Oh, tell her if you like," said Spruce, and he picked up Merry's sled and threw himself on it.

They watched him to the bottom of the hill, and then Merry said:

"It's really a heavenly idea; but it won't do you any good, and anyway it's very nervy."

"Oh, tell me," begged Pam.

"Well, it's this: it's hard work pulling the bob up the hill, and Spruce wondered if—"

"You mean Cricket and Clinker?" Pam replied. "Of course, you may have them—that is, I'm sure you can because Joy was talking about it as we walked over this morning and she wondered if the boys would like to have them."

"Oh, isn't Joy the most heavenly girl? She always thinks of things like that, doesn't she?" said Merry.

"I saw her going toward home with Ste-

phen and Bob, and I guess that's where they've gone. If they don't bring Clinker, we'll go over for him," said Pam.

"And bring Whisper back. She was busy dusting when I came this morning, but she'll soon be through," Merry answered.

Spruce came back.

"There's Joy and Stephen with Cricket now," he said, crossly. "There was no need for you to ask, Merry, but you're always talking too much, anyway."

"Why, Spruce Talcott, I heard you tell her she could ask me," Pam burst out. "Aren't you mean? I'll never speak to you again if you don't take that all back."

Pam was, as always, taking the girl's part; had Joy been there, she would have understood.

"Oh, Pam, how silly! I don't mind," Merry laughed good-naturedly.

"Well, I think he's unfair, so there!"

Pam turned her back upon the now repentant Spruce and walked toward Joy and Stephen.

"Where's Bob?" she called.

"He's gone over for Clinker. I knew you wouldn't mind," replied Joy.

"I'm going over for Whisper," said Merry. "Anybody want to come with me?"

"Tell you what I'll do; I'll pull you all over on the bob," said Spruce, intent on making up.

"Oh! Spruce, how heavenly nice of you!" Merry exclaimed.

"Let's hitch Cricket to the bob, and drive around in state," suggested Stephen.

"Will Mabs mind?" Merry asked, looking at Spruce.

"No, it's only coasting she objects to," said Spruce, convincingly.

Joy had brought some old worn-out harness from the harness room, and they proceeded to hitch up Cricket to the bob. Stephen took the reins, slapped them on the pony's back, and off they started. The bob swerved and bumped and slid along on the hard snow.

They went first to Whisper's house. She was standing rather disconsolately on the front steps of the little cottage. It would not have dawned on her to have joined the others without being especially asked. She hailed their coming with delight, and took her place between Pam and Merry.

"Home, James," laughed Spruce; and Stephen chirruped to Cricket, and they were off again.

On the way they met Bob riding Clinker, and they decided to hitch both ponies to

the sled. This accomplished, they drove in state up to the Roots' house, where Ted was indoors with a cold. Mrs. Root was out marketing.

Ted came to the window and made signs to them. When they had condoled with him long enough, they drove on, this time down to the Talcotts' to find Dandy, whose day it was to shovel the walk.

The hill was steep and Stephen was an inexperienced driver. They were going as fast as the little ponies' hoofs could beat.

"Keep straight!" warned Joy.

Spruce was applying the brakes, but Stephen decided he wanted to go to see the Betts, and pulled the ponies to the right. There was a snowdrift on one side and a low bank on the other. The ponies gave a sudden jerk, the worn traces broke, the ponies jumped over the bank, and the bob went careening into the snowdrift.

There was a scramble of legs and arms, and they all got to their feet, except Whisper, who had plunged into the snow head first. The boys pulled her out.

"Oh! Whisper, are you hurt?" asked Merry.

Whisper bit her lip.

"I don't think so," she said bravely;

then she crumpled up into a little heap.

"Oh! what will we do? What will we do?" cried Pam.

Spruce took control of the situation.

"Lay her out on the bob, flat," he said, "and get her feet above her head."

Spruce was a Boy Scout and knew first aid. He washed her white face with snow, while Stephen stood by looking very sick.

"If she's dead, it's my fault," he said dramatically.

Just as the rest were beginning to think she was dead, Whisper opened her eyes.

"Don't take me home," she pleaded. "Aunt Anne will be so frightened, and anyway I can't walk."

"We'll take her to our house," Spruce decided.

So it was, that Mrs. Talcott, looking out of the window, saw the frightening spectacle of Whisper being brought home on the bobsled. The boys made a chair and carried her into the house.

"My goodness! what is the matter?" exclaimed Mrs. Talcott, throwing open wide the door. "Lay her down on the couch, boys."

"My head hurts," Whisper murmured,

"here," and she pointed to the top of her forehead.

Mrs. Talcott took off her hat and there was a big bump, swelling visibly.

"Oh!" said Mrs. Talcott, in relief; "only a bump. Merry, dear, go and get me the ice cap, and put some ice in it."

"Why not snow, Mabs?" Spruce suggested.

"Good boy, Spruce," laughed Mrs. Talcott, "go and get me some snow."

Spruce came back with enough for six bags.

"Now, you children leave me alone with Whisper," Mrs. Talcott ordered.

"Well, if you are sure she is not going to die," said Pam, "we had better go and look for the ponies."

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Stephen. "I had forgotten all about the ponies."

"Oh dear," sighed Joy, "suppose they're lost!" and Mrs. Talcott had to hear all about it.

"Spruce, you ought to have had more sense."

"But, Mabs, we weren't coasting," said Spruce, lamely.

"And, Mabs, it was such fun!" said Merry.

Jerry Talcott never scolded when she could possibly avoid it. She had too vivid a memory of her own youth.

"Well, it was all wrong," she said, "and you ought to have known better. For pity's sake, go and find those ponies, and never do such a thing again."

They left, rather crestfallen, and started on a hopeless search for the ponies.

"The thing to do," said Stephen, who felt responsible, "is to get up in a high tree and look all around."

So he chose one tree and Spruce another, and Bob still a third, and climbed to dizzy heights. Though they looked on all sides, they could see no trace of either Cricket or Clinker.

"The next thing to do is to tell Pops," said Pam. "There is no use worrying Mummy, is there, Joy?"

"No, Pops better be told first," Joy agreed.

"I'll tell him," said Stephen nervously, "it was all my fault."

He was wondering what his mother would say, and how long she would say it; for with Mrs. Winthrop one misdemeanor could last for six weeks.

They walked over in silence to the Hotchkiss place, and Pam tapped bravely on her father's door.

"Come in," called Mr. Hotchkiss, none too

gently, but his scowl changed to a smile when he saw Pam and Joy.

Pam stood back to let Stephen speak, because he had said he wished to; but Joy, sensing that Stephen did not really want to tell, dashed forward.

"Oh, Pops!" she cried, "we had Cricket and Clinker hitched to the bob, and they ran away and dumped us out, and nobody was hurt but Whisper. She got a bump on the head, but Mrs. Talcott is taking care of her, and Stephen says it was all his fault, but it was not, we were all to blame."

"No, sir," denied Stephen, "it's my fault."

"Oh, it is not," chorused the others.

Mr. Hotchkiss laughed, and all the faces relaxed except Stephen's.

"I haven't a doubt but you were all to blame," he said; "but don't fight over it. All I want is your solemn word of honor that you will never do it again; then I'll know you won't."

"But, Mr. Hotchkiss, the ponies," Stephen reminded.

"Oh, yes, to be sure, the ponies. If you'll go out to the barn, you'll find John rubbing them down. They came home an hour ago."

CHAPTER XI

PLANS FOR CHRISTMAS

JOY and Pam, with Merry and Whisper, were discussing Christmas presents. Merry and Whisper were sewing industriously, while Joy and Pam were doing wonderful things with sealing wax. They were at Miss York's little cottage and she was in and out of the room to see that they did not burn themselves with the hot sealing wax.

"Joy, aren't you excited about your mother's wedding?" Merry inquired. "I'm so thrilled to think I'm invited; and coming the day after Christmas is best of all."

"Why?" queried Pam, surprised.

"Because," replied Merry, "the day after Christmas is always as flat as a pancake. I get used to my new things on Christmas day and then I feel, oh! every-which-way the day after."

"You eat too much Christmas dinner," laughed Pam. "Of course, we're excited about Mummie's wedding."

"Did you know we are going to walk

up the aisle carrying flowers?" Joy asked.

"No! How perfectly heavenly!" exclaimed Merry, and Whisper sighed.

"What are you asking for, this Christmas?" Joy went on. "This is the second time I ever spent Christmas in a house, and I do hope it snows so I can use my new sled."

"How do you know you are going to get one?" Merry inquired.

"Oh, I saw it being delivered at the back door. It's a flexible flyer. Of course, I asked for snowshoes, too, and ice skates," Joy said.

"I guess everybody in the C. and S. S. Club are asking for snowshoes this year. I know I am," laughed Merry.

Whisper looked at them all in silent amazement. She had asked for half a dozen handkerchiefs and some new hair ribbons; for Whisper's hair was not bobbed, but hung down her back in two big braids. Mrs. Payton never saw their sleek neatness without wanting to loosen them so that they fluffed around her face.

"Pam and I are going to be together Christmas morning, because Mummie's giving a house party; and of course Pops will be there," Joy said.

"So will Gloria, worse luck!" said Pam.

"We needn't bother about her," Joy com-

forted. "Mummie says she and you and Pops and I will get up early Christmas morning and have our stockings alone in the library."

"I adore hanging my stocking," Merry exclaimed, "don't you, Whisper?"

"No, it's silly to hang your stocking when you don't believe in Santa Claus," the practical Whisper replied.

"Oh! but it's such fun!" Merry cried. "The boys and I put crazy things in each other's stockings. Last year I put a lump of coal in Dandy's and a switch in Spruce's, and they put chestnut burrs in mine."

"I never thought of that," said Whisper.

"Oh! you and Sniffs have simply got to hang up your stockings," Pam decided.

They worked for a minute in silence. Whisper was busy knitting a muffler for Mrs. Talcott; Merry was cross-stitching a towel for Mrs. Payton's trousseau; Joy was busy over a tin ash tray which she was covering with yellow and violet sealing wax for Mr. Hotchkiss; and Pam was busy with a string of beads for Mrs. Payton.

"There's a party at your house Christmas afternoon," Joy said to Merry. "I do think your mother's a darling to let you have it."

"We always have a tree on Christmas, and just everybody comes," Merry replied.

"Don't forget the Roots' party on Christmas Eve," Pam put in.

"And just think, I'm asked to all of them," said Whisper. "I've never been to a Christmas party. Do you have to dress up a lot? I've only got my pink challis that Aunt Anne made me."

"Then I'll wear my white serge to keep you company," said Merry generously. "Besides, maybe you'll get a dress for Christmas."

"Who'd give me one?" Whisper asked, wistfully. "No, I guess I'll have a good time in my pink challis. Dresses don't count," she went on bravely. "I had an awfully good time at the church supper one year, and I was the only girl there who wore a gingham dress. My! but I did have fun! Of course, the girls were not very nice."

"They weren't, eh?" bristled Merry. "I wish I'd been there. I'd have had a heavenly time squelching them. I just love stuck-up people, they're so silly."

"I don't," replied Pam. "I hate them. They're like Gloria. Excuse me, Joy, even if she is your cousin, I hate her."

"Well, I'm not crazy about her myself," laughed Joy. "I wish she wasn't going to spend Christmas with us, but she's coming with Aunt Ida and Uncle William to Mum-

mie's and Pops' wedding, and Edna and Marcia are coming over the first day she gets here."

"I should think Edna and Marcia would hate having her go to the same school," Pam remarked.

"Oh, the twins told me Edna said she'd make her behave. I guess it will do Gloria good," Joy replied.

"Boarding school! Heavenly idea!" exclaimed Merry. "Why can't we four go to boarding school some day? We could have such fun!"

"Let's!" exclaimed Pam. "Wouldn't it be gorgeous!"

"I really think Mummie would let us," said Joy. "She approves of it for Gloria. What about you, Whisper?"

At this point in the conversation Miss York came in.

"Oh! Sniffs," Pam exclaimed, "will you let Whisper go to boarding school with us?"

Miss York regarded her in surprise.

"Boarding school?" she said regretfully. "No, I'm afraid not. Sarah will have to stay with me and help me with the children."

Miss York was starting a kindergarten after the first of the year. She already had nine children enrolled.

"She will miss you and Joy the second term, I know, and I wish with all my heart she could go with you to Miss Lathrop, for whom I have a great respect, but it can't be, so we must think no more about it," Miss York finished.

"Oh," sighed Merry, "it would be heavenly if she could; but never mind, I'll see you just the same, Whisper."

Whisper nodded. She took the whole thing philosophically. She was lots better off than she had been when she was slaving on the farm with her father. She had girl friends now, a luxury she had never expected. She was contented with little; all she asked for was a new dress, and she did not ask for that aloud.

"Won't it be fun living with Sniffs and Whisper when your mother and father are away on their honeymoon?" Mary asked as the three girls walked home to their luncheons.

"Yes, but it will be much more fun when Mummie and Pops get home and we all go to live at Pam's house," Joy replied.

"Mabs says it will be good for Whisper," Merry remarked.

"You must be over there simply all the time," Pam replied, "tho' of course Joy and

I will be awfully busy seeing about the changes in our house.'"

"You know, Mummie is giving Pops a studio for a wedding present. It's really a little bit of a house. Then there's all the new furniture for the big house. Aunt Amy is coming home from Europe just for the wedding. Of course she will take charge, but we're going to help."

"I'm crazy to meet Aunt Amy," Pam exclaimed. "Will I like her, Joy?"

"I'm not sure," Joy admitted. "I'm not very fond of her myself. She's just a little bit like a steam roller."

"Is she your mother's sister?" asked Merry.

"No, she's just a friend of Mother's," Joy told her. "She painted the picture of me when I was a little girl."

They had come to the crossroads, one of which led to the Talcotts' and one to the Paytons'.

Merry hesitated, then she said suddenly:

"I don't think I'll go to boarding school, if Whisper can't," and she walked off abruptly without giving Joy or Pam a chance to protest.

The other two girls walked on. Pam was lunching with Joy that day. At last Joy said:

"I don't think I can stay home always from

boarding school because Whisper does, do you, Pam?"

"No, we'll go some day, I guess, but we must never forget her and Merry," Pam replied.

"Oh, never!" said Joy.

"Well, how are my two daughters?" asked Flora Payton, who came out to the hall to meet them. "You have guests. Come and see who's here."

The girls were surprised to see Edna and Marcia sitting on the sofa. They were delighted, too.

"Oh, you must stay for luncheon!" Joy cried, and her mother nodded.

"I've already asked them," she said.

"Hello! you two," greeted Edna. "We've come to beg."

"Tell us what for," Pam requested.

"Oh, you explain it, Mrs. Payton," Marcia suggested.

Mrs. Payton smiled.

"Well, Marcia and Edna, with Dr. Forbes' help, have discovered a very needy family. The father has no position, and there are six little children, who won't have any Christmas, unless you girls make it. Joy, you haven't any toys?"

"Oh, but I have just loads," interrupted

Pam. "We'll go right down to my house after luncheon."

"Oh, Mummie, what can I do?" Joy's face had fallen; she had no toys, because she had not been at home during the age for toys.

"You may go down to the village and buy some baby clothes for the small baby," responded Mrs. Payton, "and I'll go with you to help; and I think some of your clothes would fit the eldest girl."

All of them ate hurriedly, for they were eager to be off; and in Pam's attic they found a veritable toy shop. They piled the things in a bag, and started for the Talcotts'.

"Toys!" exclaimed Mrs. Talcott. "Take a bushel basket and go to the playroom."

Dandy and Spruce were not at home, but Merry led the way. They came back with a large package.

Merry accompanied them, and they stopped at the cottage for Whisper, who, when she heard what was afoot, contributed six of her favorite books.

They drove down into the village and shopped for baby clothes, two little worsted sacks, three pairs of bootees, three dresses, and underthings to match. They arrived at Mrs. Root's heavily laden, and spent the rest of the afternoon wrapping up toys.

"It's all very well," said Mrs. Root, "to give them Christmas presents, but what they need is coal and wood. Mr. Root is going to see that the man gets a job, for he's a deserving, capable cobbler. Charity is all very well, but all people are happier when helping themselves. I'll start a subscription at the club to-night, and I'll make that wealthy Mrs. Winthrop donate in Stephen's name, for this is the children's charity."

The girls all worked hard. but Whisper worked the hardest.

CHAPTER XII

WHISPER'S SURPRISE

"I KNOW perfectly well I won't like it." It was Gloria who was speaking. A discontented curl of her lips spoiled the beauty of her young face. Her fair straight brows were puckered in an ugly frown. She was sitting in Mrs. Payton's living room on the comfortable sofa, between Edna and Marcia, and they were discussing boarding school.

"I don't see why you say that," said Marcia, gently.

"Nor I," added Edna, not gently at all. "Just because you're crazy about dancing doesn't mean that you can't learn to like something else."

"There's hockey," put in Marcia. "Do you skate?"

"No, I don't," pouted Gloria; "my ankles are too weak."

"Poppycock!" exclaimed Edna. "Wear braces."

"But I don't like to skate," Gloria protested.

The two girls looked at her in hopeless despair.

"She'll never fit," thought Marcia; and Edna also decided she was quite hopeless.

"I don't see why Father's making me go," Gloria went on to complain. "It's all Joy's fault, really. He's got a ridiculous notion in his head that he wants me to be like her. Just imagine!"

"You might do worse," said Edna, drily. "We think around here Joy's a pretty fine girl."

"But I'm years older than she is," Gloria protested.

"Oh! come now," said Edna, flatly. "You're only three years older. Give Joy another year, and see the changes it will make."

"In Joy?" asked Gloria, incredulously. "She'll always be just a kid—she's that kind."

Marcia and Edna froze; they supposed Gloria thought them kids, too.

"Well," said Marcia, a little primly, "I'm afraid you won't like 'Brookside.' "

"And perhaps," said Edna roughly, " 'Brookside' won't like you."

"Oh," said Gloria, considering this point

of view for the first time. "Girls usually like me," she added lamely.

"Yes, your kind of girl," said Edna, intent upon taking Gloria down a peg or two.

"Well, my kind are the best," Gloria defended, "because we're up and doing."

"Up and doing? Oh, my hat!" laughed Marcia.

"I suppose," said Edna, witheringly, "you consider you're up and doing because you know the latest dance step; but yet you don't know how to play hockey, you can't skate, you can't play basket ball, and you'd die of fright on a bobsled. I suppose you can drive a motor."

"Well, I could. I'm sure I could, but Father won't let me." She was wilting visibly.

It was Marcia who had pity.

"Aren't we a lot of sillies?" she said cheerfully. "We're just different kinds of girls, that's all. Gloria doesn't like our kind, and we don't like hers; but that's no reason why we can't be friends. We will all be new girls at 'Brookside,' and it would be silly of us not to be on speaking terms. Perhaps Gloria will find somebody there who's more her style. Until then she'll have to put up with us for pals."

"Yes, I suppose so," agreed Edna. "Anyway, it wasn't very nice of me to be so rude; and then, too, you are going to be my guest to-night. Let's forget it, and talk of something else."

For a minute they sat in silence and stared into the wood fire. Then Joy and Pam broke into their embarrassment, for none of them could think of a thing to say.

"Stop talking boarding school," laughed Joy. "Did you know, Edna, that Pam and I are going to beg Pops and Mummie to let us go to 'Brookside' next year?"

"Hurrah for you!" laughed Edna. "You two will be a riot at 'Brookside.'"

"To-night we'll introduce you to a real 'Brooksider,' Faith Hunt. She's driving over with her brother to Edna's party."

"Would you really like to have us?" Pam exclaimed.

"Of course, we would. You'll be popular too, and, Joy, when they hear about the gypsies, they will have you dancing gypsy dances every minute of your spare time."

"Oh, I won't tell them about the gypsies; I'm going to keep that a secret. Just my best friends know about that," Joy replied, seriously.

"All right," agreed Marcia and Edna.

"Won't you miss Ted and Bob?" Edna teased.

"Yes, terribly," Pam and Joy both answered.

"Sorry to break up your boarding-school chatter," said Flora Payton, standing in the doorway, "but it's time for you to take your Christmas presents around, girls," she said to Joy and Pam.

"Oh, let's all go!" Pam exclaimed.

They put on their things, covered the floor of the automobile with packages, and all got in.

"Where to?" Patrick asked, smiling with the Christmas spirit.

"The Talcotts' first," Joy told him, then turning to the others, she added: "We can see if Whisper is with Merry. We've simply *got* to get her out of the house before we deliver her presents."

"What are you going to give Whisper?" Edna asked. "We've got a book for her on the Christmas tree."

"Oh, Mummie is giving her a crepe-de-chine dress, with ducky roses in it; and black patent leather slippers to go with it," Joy replied.

"And Joy is giving her silk stockings; Pops and I a silver wrist watch; and I know the Talcotts' are giving her a sled," Pam said.

"I am very anxious to meet this remarkable Whisper," Gloria said, loftily.

Joy had been directing the conversation to Edna and Marcia. Now she turned to her cousin.

"Oh! you won't like her," she said hurriedly, and turned back again to the other girls.

"I wish somebody was going to give her snowshoes; but we'll just have to lend her ours," she went on.

They turned into the Talcott place and saw Merry and Whisper coasting down the terrace.

"Good!" said Marcia, as excited as Joy and Pam. "Whisper is here safe and sound."

"Don't call them, anybody," Pam warned, but Merry and Whisper had seen them, and came over to the car.

"Hello! you two, and Marcia and Edna! Hello! Gloria! Have you come to coast?" Merry greeted them.

"No, we're delivering Christmas presents," Joy told her. "Isn't it exciting? You get out of the way now, or you might see the shape of something, and guess what it is."

"How heavenly!" exclaimed Merry. "I won't look because I adore surprises. What's in the long box?"

"Something for your mother," Pam told

her, "and you can't see it. Go away and coast while we take them in."

"Oh! Christmas presents!" exclaimed Mrs. Talcott, who had seen the approaching car from an upstairs window, and was in the front hall when the door was opened.

"How pretty they look!" she added, as they filled her arms with packages. "Your mother always thinks of the sweetest ways of doing things. Green paper and red ribbons—I adore it—and a sprig of holly in each! Come in, and tell me all the news."

"You are surely coming over to-night to help Mother, aren't you?" Edna asked.

"Wouldn't miss it for the world, and Tom's coming, too," said Mrs. Talcott.

"Oh! good!" exclaimed Marcia. "I'm so glad! It's never a real party unless you're there."

"Angel child, what a nice thing to say!" exclaimed Mrs. Talcott. "How's Mother?"

"Very well." Marcia's expression grew radiant. "She's coming to the party too, and even Father. Think of it!"

"Wonderful! And how about that poor family? Did you take the things down to them?" Mrs. Talcott asked.

"Oh, yes, and they were so happy," Marcia replied.

"And we dressed the baby up in its new clothes. It's a darling little mite; and Father got the man a job," Edna told her.

Mrs. Talcott nodded sympathetically; and then turned to Gloria.

"I've been neglecting you," she laughed. "How do you think you are going to like Christmas away from home; but you brought your mother and father with you, didn't you?"

"Oh, yes, they're here," said Gloria, listlessly.

Mrs. Talcott looked at her for a minute, and decided that boarding school would do her good.

"Well, let's have something to eat," she suggested aloud.

"Oh, we can't," said Joy, regretfully. "We're going to Whisper's. You keep her here for a while."

"Yes, indeed. I wish I could have a peek at the dress; but I'll see it to-night."

"Good-by," said Pam.

"And Merry Christmas!" laughed Joy. "There, I'm the first one to say it."

"So you are. I'll see you to-night," and Mrs. Talcott waved them into the car as if she had been fourteen instead of thirty-four.

Whisper's was the next stop. The four girls

got out, laden with bundles; Gloria decided to wait in the car.

Pam lifted the brass knocker and tapped gently. Miss York opened the door. She looked rather forlorn, but she smiled at sight of them.

"Why, girls! What have you there?" she asked.

"Whisper's Christmas present, and we want to lay it out on her bed," Joy told her.

"And, oh, Sniffs, she's to wear it to-night. It's from Mummie, and Joy's present goes with it. Mine can wait till to-morrow," said Pam.

"But it isn't Christmas, and I don't think I'll let Sarah go to-night. I had no idea it was to be such a big party until I heard to-day. Sarah hasn't a dress really fitting to wear and I couldn't have her feel ashamed. It's better for her to stay home with me."

"But she has a dress, a real party dress. Come upstairs and we'll show you. And, oh, Sniffs, she simply *must* come!" Joy begged.

"And Miss York, Mother's expecting you, too," said Edna, eagerly. "The last thing I heard her say was: 'I do hope Miss York is coming.'"

"It's Christmas Eve, and you can't disappoint us," laughed Marcia. "I saw some-

thing on the tree marked with your name."

"Oh! dear," said Miss York, "you take me quite off my feet," and she sniffed.

"Hurry, let's put Whisper's dress out on her bed before she gets home!" exclaimed Joy.

They all crowded up the staircase, and when they were in Whisper's little room they almost filled it.

Joy made Miss York undo the packages, and with a little gasp, half thankful, and half tearful, she shook from its folds a white crepe-de-chine dress dotted with tiny pink rosebuds. The shoes came next, and the silk stockings.

"Oh! oh!" sniffed Miss York; "this is too much. Oh! girls, my little Sarah—you do like her, don't you? It's not just because you are sorry for her," and Miss York cried.

The girls stood awkwardly by until Marcia said wisely:

"We all love Whisper, Miss York. She's such a nice kid, sort of fine, if you know what I mean. Please don't cry."

"But Whisper can't return this kind of gift," Miss York protested, weakly.

"She can, by just being Whisper," Edna put in gently.

"Why, Sniffs, the things she's knitted are perfectly sweet," Joy said, indignantly; "and

it's only Mummie and Pops who have given her these, and they don't want anything back."

Miss York looked up and smiled through her tears.

"Thank you, girls, all of you," she said. "You have made my Christmas very happy. I won't come to the party, Edna, unless your mother really lets me help."

"But of course she will," Edna protested. "There'll be just heaps of things to do."

Gloria, outside, waited impatiently in the car. She was a little sorry that she had not gone in, for she was lonely, and she wanted with all her heart to be able to make a fuss about Whisper's new dress; but she had somehow forgotten to be enthusiastic. Perhaps boarding school would bring it back—she wondered.

CHAPTER XIII

THE MYSTERIOUS SNOWSHOES

WHISPER left Merry and went home just as the sun was setting. She loved sunsets, and she stood on the steps to watch the great ball of fire as it dropped slowly out of sight beyond the crooked hills; then she turned with a little sigh and went into the cottage.

Her aunt was waiting for her. She had decided in her all-too-practical mind that Whisper must eat her supper before she saw her dress, or she would not eat it at all; so supper was there for her, a modest little spread of poached eggs and bread and butter, strawberry jam and gingerbread.

Whisper washed her hands in the kitchen and sat down. She was hungry enough to have eaten six eggs, so she lingered over the two before her. Miss York believed in light meals at night.

Whisper never questioned Aunt Anne's judgment, but she wondered why they were

having supper a little after five instead of the regular six o'clock.

"To give me time to dress for the party," she supposed.

When the last crumb of gingerbread was gone, Aunt Anne let her wash up the dishes as usual.

"And now," she said, when they had all been put away in their own special niches, "go upstairs and lie down for a little while, so that you will be rested for the party," and there was the nearest possible approach to a twinkle in her pale gray eyes.

Whisper went upstairs reluctantly and her aunt stood at the bottom and waited for the cry of joy that would come. A minute's pause, and then Whisper came to the landing.

"Oh! Aunt Anne," she called, "Joy or Pam—I don't know which—has loaned me a dress for the party."

Miss York went up the stairs in disappointment.

"It's not loaned, my dear, it's yours—I thought you would understand," she said.

"Mine!" and then Whisper gave the little cry Miss York had been expecting. "Really mine! Oh! Aunt, pinch me, I'm sure I'm asleep."

"No, Sarah, you are quite awake. The

dress is a Christmas present from Mrs. Payton, the stockings are from Joy, and I have something for you from Pam, which you will see to-morrow."

"But the slippers!" exclaimed Whisper. "Who gave me the beautiful slippers? Aunt Anne," she said solemnly, "I never thought I should own a pair of patent leather slippers, did you?"

Miss York considered. "I had hoped some day to buy you a pair myself, Sarah; but if you take care of these they will last a long time."

"Oh! I'll never wear them except to parties; and only think, Aunt Anne, I will be really dressed up for Mrs. Payton's wedding."

A knock at the door interrupted them, and sent Miss York hurrying downstairs. Whisper hung over the banisters. There was no one at the door, but a big, queeer-shaped package fell in as it was opened. Miss York picked it up and looked at it. A tag on it read: "To whisper, from One who likes her." It was written in a round hand that straggled a little.

"Sarah, go back to your room and close the door," Miss York called, and Whisper obeyed wonderingly.

Miss York surveyed the package. It was much wider at one end than the other, and

quite flat. She wondered what under the sun it was—there was no time to guess, so she put it behind the bookcase, and went upstairs.

Whisper was still standing gazing at her dress.

Up at the Paytons' Joy and Pam were dressing together, and getting an enormous amount of fun out of it.

"I wish Merry had asked Whisper to dress at her house," Joy said, as she buckled a strap of her black slipper. "She may be lonely with just Sniffs."

"We might have asked her here, but it's more fun being just you and me," Pam replied. "Anyhow, I hope she isn't lonely," and she dismissed the subject as Jane came into the room with two boxes.

"Very grown-up young ladies you are, receiving flowers for a party," she said. "The like of it I never heard; but your Uncle William insisted in spite of all your mother and I could say."

The girls paid no attention to her but rushed to open the boxes. Inside were tiny rosebuds and mignonette bunched in a small nosegay and held together by a frill of perforated white paper.

"Oh, how ducky!" exclaimed Pam. "But

how can we wear them? Our dresses have no waists."

"You don't wear nosegays, child," corrected Jane, who had once been a lady's maid. "You carry them in your hand so," and her big hand almost hid the tiny bunch.

Pam nodded, and rescued the flowers.

"Oh! isn't my Uncle William just the dearest man!" exclaimed Joy.

"Do you love him better than Pops?" Pam asked, jealously.

"No, of course not, silly, how could I? I love Uncle William equal with the Colonel," Joy answered.

And Uncle William, had he heard, should have been flattered.

Joy's and Pam's dresses were made alike, the only difference being the color. Joy's was yellow and Pam's was green. They were made of heavy georgette crepe, and trimmed with accordion pleated flounces; they fell straight from the shoulder, and came just to the knee.

"Well, are my daughters almost ready?" Mrs. Payton stood in the doorway. "You know we promised to be there first, and we have to stop for Whisper."

"And Pops," Joy added.

"No, Pops is going for the Colonel, and

they won't be there until a little later," explained Mrs. Payton.

"All right, let's start. I'm crazy to see Whisper in her new dress, aren't you?" Pam asked, as they stopped at Gloria's room.

Gloria looked really lovely. She was wearing shell pink, and it emphasized the fairness of her skin; she also carried a bunch of flowers like Joy's and Pam's.

"Wasn't it dear of Uncle William to send us these? I must go and thank him—I suppose you have," Joy exclaimed.

"What's the hurry? I'll see him later," Gloria replied.

But Joy had already dashed off to the library, where she found her uncle staring into the fire.

"Hello! little gypsy," he said, and pulled her down to his knee, "did you like the posies?"

"Oh! Uncle William, I wish you were coming, too," Joy said, tenderly. "Thank you just heaps for the flowers. I do love them, and I'll take care of them and carry them tomorrow."

"Bless your heart, I'm glad you like them," said Uncle William. "Have a good time, and tell me all about it in the morning."

"Oh! I will—I'm sure to," said Joy, as Pam tiptoed in.

"Thank you for the flowers, Uncle William. They're ducky, and it was awfully nice of you to give them to me, because I'm not really your niece."

"Let's forget that," said Uncle William, "and pretend you are."

Gloria stuck her head in at the door.

"Thanks for the flowers, Father," she said in an offhand manner; and they all moved on to the waiting car.

Whisper had been ready for hours, or so it seemed to her; and she flew to Mrs. Payton when she came in and hugged her. She was so surprised at her own actions that she stood back and stammered:

"I guess I couldn't help it, Mrs. Payton," she said. "The dress is so beautiful."

Mrs. Payton smiled, but she was surveying her critically at the same time.

"Miss York," she said finally, "do let me fix Whisper's hair. It is much too tidy. I won't ruffle it much, but let me see if I can't make it more becoming. She has such lovely hair, it's a pity not to show it."

"Certainly, Mrs. Payton," Miss York replied. She wanted Sarah to look like other girls, but it never occurred to her to fix her

"She looks like a picture out of Kate Greenaway."

hair differently from the usual severe way.

Mrs. Payton took Whisper upstairs, and Miss York showed Joy and Pam and Gloria the mysterious package that had come.

"Do you know who could have sent it?" she asked.

They looked at the untidy handwriting, but they had never seen it before.

"No," said Pam. "Maybe it was one of the Talcotts."

"But they sent a sled; it's down in the cellar," Miss York reminded them.

"How mysterious!" laughed Gloria. "Maybe your father sent it, Pam."

"No, he'd have told me, I'm sure; and look at the writing. Isn't it exciting! And she'll never be able to thank anyone because she doesn't know who it is; and she will suspect everybody." Pam, as usual, was getting a maximum of enjoyment out of the affair.

They heard Mrs. Payton and Whisper laughing on the stairs, and Miss York had just time to slide the package back into its hiding-place before they came into the room, Mrs. Payton leading Whisper by the hand.

It was a changed Whisper. Her hair, that had always been captive in its heavy braid, was flowing about her shoulders, and it was soft and fluffy around her wistful little face.

"Do you like it, Aunt Anne?" she asked, fearfully.

Miss York looked at her and flushed.

"It's very sweet," was all she said, but there was pride in her eyes. "I don't think," she added, "it would do for playing, but it's very nice for a party."

"Sweet? It's adorable!" laughed Mrs. Payton gayly. "She looks like a picture out of Kate Greenway. But come along; we mustn't be late for the party."

She hurried them all out to the car, Miss York protesting that if there wasn't enough room she could walk, and off they started for the Roots'.

Merry was in the dressing room when they arrived, and she hugged Whisper.

"How simply heavenly you look! Come and show Mabs and Dad," she said.

"Whisper is going to have a good time tonight, I feel it in my bones," said Joy, unconsciously uttering one of Mother Ia's favorite expressions.

"Whisper?" laughed Pam, excitedly, "We're all going to have a good time. Yes," with a look in her direction, "even Gloria."

CHAPTER XIV

STEPHEN—ELECTRICIAN

"OH! Joy hurry up!" Bob's voice came to them through the closed door.

Joy gave a final pat to her hair, and with Pam went out in the hall, where they found him waiting for them.

"Come on down. Dad's going to light the tree. Gee! I'm glad you're early, I've got something to tell you."

"What is it?" Joy asked.

"Well, don't let on that you know," warned Bob, "but to-day Ted and I were down at the station yard helping those Rocci boys pick up coal—Oh, Mother didn't know it, but it was the only Christmas present they had to give their mother, so we helped them until the station master chased us away."

"Well, go on!" Joy exclaimed, impatiently.

"I'm going but, honestly I don't like to think about it; I'm so scared it might not be true."

"Bob, if you don't tell us quickly I'll go

and get Ted to tell me," said Pam. "What are you talking about?"

"This," said Bob, with an intake of breath that was prodigious, "we saw them unloading two ponies at the freight station, two brown and white ones just the size of Clinker and Cricket."

"Oh!" gasped Pam. "The four Colonials! Think of the fun we can have!"

"But maybe they're not ours. We don't know; that's the terrible part of it. If we knew we could shout or something, but—"

Joy made up her mind quickly.

"They are not yours," she said with certainty. "They're Merry's and Whisper's."

Pam started to protest, looked at her best friend, and stopped. Joy was up to something—she could tell that by the way her eyelids quivered.

Bob's face fell a mile.

"Honest!" he said. "How can you be sure?"

"Oh! I only mean maybe," Joy replied. "But I *feel* that those ponies are for Merry and Whisper."

"Shucks! about your feelings!" Bob replied, disconsolately. "I bet Mr. Talcott told you, and made you promise not to give it away."

"Maybe," said Joy, maddeningly.

"Go on and tell a fellow," Bob pleaded, but Joy only shook her head, although her eyes twinkled. Bob saw the twinkle and took heart.

"Well, maybe they are ours, anyway."

"Maybe," persisted Joy.

"Come on, you kids. Dad's going to light the tree; the people will be coming soon," and Ted came to them from the other room.

"Have you told the girls about this afternoon?" he asked.

"Yes; Joy says 'maybe,' and that's all."

"She's trying to tease you. Look at her! She can't keep her face straight." Ted pointed at Joy. "Watch her laugh."

Well, of course Joy laughed, she couldn't help it.

"I was only teasing, Bob; I'm sure they're yours," she said.

"Well, I'm not," Bob replied glumly.

Joy saw she had planted the seed of doubt in his mind, and she was both a little sorry and a little glad because she was afraid Bob's evening was spoiled; and glad because she wanted the ponies to be a real surprise on Christmas morning. She never for a moment doubted that they were the twins' ponies.

They went into the low, old-fashioned living

room, and Joy noticed that the rugs were not up for dancing, and her heart sank. Gloria would not have a good time after all.

Mr. Root was trying to light the electric lights on the Christmas tree, but something had gone wrong with the battery.

Much to everyone's surprise, Stephen Winthrop was the first of the guests to arrive. He came in, embarrassed as usual.

" 'Lo, everybody! that is, how do you do, Mrs. Root?" he said, holding out a very red and chapped hand.

Mrs. Root noted with sympathy that there was a button off his Eton suit. He walked over to Mr. Root, who was looking ruefully at the box that held the batteries.

"Let me do that for you," Stephen said abruptly. "I'd like to."

"Well, if you can make the thing work, you're a wiser man than I am," laughed Mr. Root.

"Hurry up, Dad, somebody's coming," Mrs. Root called from the hallway—she had left the room to speak to the maid who had had some trouble with the ice-cream freezer.

"Easy enough to say," replied Mr. Root, "but the thing simply won't light. The batteries must be burned out, and now—oh! my word, Stephen's got it all over the floor!"

"Work in a minute, sir," assured Stephen. "Conection's loose. Got a screw driver? Sewing machine one's the best."

"Yes, I'll get it." Bob dashed off, while Spruce and Dandy Talcott dropped to their knees and hung over Stephen's shoulder.

Edna and Marcia came in from the dining room, where they had been putting finishing touches to the table.

"Oh! do hurry, Steve! Do hurry and put those batteries back! Why, the place looks awful," said Edna.

"Just a minute, just a minute," said Stephen, calmly; and he went on with the intricate fixing of wires; then he touched his tongue to one piece and announced that the batteries were dead.

"No lights? Oh, what a shame!" cried Edna, almost in tears.

"I told you boys not to turn them on and off all the time," said Mr. Root, angrily.

"Now, Dad, it's Christmas Eve, and besides, the boys didn't do it any oftener than you did yourself. We simply can't have lights, and everybody will understand," Mrs. Root said.

"Got a toaster?" Stephen asked. "Can fix it if you don't mind giving it to me—the cord I mean—rig it up so that it will be attached to the electric light."

"Anything, Stephen—can you really do it?" Mrs. Root asked, eagerly.

"Sure—I mean yes, Mrs. Root," Stephen began splicing wires, and cutting off the ends of the toaster cord.

Meanwhile the guests arrived, and were kept in the hall by Mrs. Root. Edna poked her head in the door every now and then, beseeching Stephen to hurry.

At last the combination was ready. Stephen rose from the floor and trailed yards of wire after him.

"Fasten this to the light now," he said. "Guess it will be all right," and he unscrewed the bulb, handing it to Mr. Root. "Now then," he said and started to screw the end of the toaster cord into the socket. There was a sudden hiss, a blue flash, and the entire house was in darkness, every light out.

There was a moment's silence, and then everybody began to laugh. The door into the hall opened and the guests came in, all talking at once.

"What shall we do?" moaned Edna.

"Light the candles first," said Mrs. Root.

Fortunately, there was a seven-branch candlestick on the console table, and a pair of brass ones on the mantel.

"Where's Stephen? It wasn't his fault,"

said Mrs. Root, "and I don't want him to feel badly about it."

But Stephen was not to be found, and the window was open, but more guests were arriving and he was forgotten for the moment.

"Let's play ghosts," Marcia suggested; she had her arm in Faith Hunt's.

Faith was a tall, athletic-looking girl, with a boyish bob and merry brown eyes.

"Oh! let's!" she exclaimed. "Mrs. Root, have you plenty of sheets?" she asked, laughing.

"Plenty" said Mrs. Root clutching at a straw; if the children wanted to make the best of a bad situation, she was only too willing to provide so simple a thing as sheets.

"Well, give us two, and send the girls in one room and the boys in the other." Faith seemed to have taken command of the party. "Girls, choose a ghost from your lot, and, boys, you choose one, some one you all know, but that the others don't know so awfully well; and wrap them up in a sheet and bring them in where they can talk to each other, and from their voices and their answers the rest must describe them, and the one who describes best gets a candy cane from the tree."

The girls thought this would be a wonderful game, but the boys were not so enthusiastic.

It lacked action. The girls consulted in the hall.

"Let's take Whisper. The boys don't really know her very well, and I'll bet none of them know the color of her eyes," Edna suggested.

"They'll guess who she is the minute she speaks," laughed Marcia. "Don't you know Whisper always says: 'Oh! please' before she says things."

Whisper had been on the edge of the crowd of girls and just heard her name mentioned.

"Oh! please don't choose me," she said, and the rest laughed.

"Where's the gypsy girl you were telling me about? Let's take her," suggested Faith.

"Oh! but all the boys know Joy awfully well," Edna protested. "Let's take you, Faith."

Faith demurred, but was finally persuaded. They wrapped her up in a sheet and led her into the dimly lighted room.

A boy ghost was already sitting on the floor.

"Well," began the boy ghost in a gruff voice, "would you say that your eyes were the color of the skies?"

"Oh! please, sir," whispered Faith, "I wouldn't be so bold as that."

"Methinks thou art tall."

"Methinks thou art short."

"I am not."

"Oh! but verily thou art."

"Oh! very well. I think your favorite word is 'heavenly.' "

"No, my favorite word is 'scat.' "

"Oh!" said a voice from the boys' side of the room, "I might have known." It was Faith's brother, Owen, who spoke.

"I know," shouted Bob, "bobbed hair, anyway."

"And my eyes?" laughed the ghost.

"Oh! pink—I don't know," grinned Bob, "but I know who you are, only I won't tell."

"Do you like girls with blonde hair?" asked Faith of her fellow ghost.

"No, I prefer red heads," laughed the unknown boy.

"How heavenly!" giggled Merry. "I know who it is, and *I* won't tell."

Joy jumped up.

"It's a boy with golden hair and blue eyes. He is president of the 'Kick the Can' Club, and he is just fourteen."

"I always said that child learned second-sight from the gypsies," laughed Spruce, as he took off his sheet and stood up. "As for this masquerading person, I think I will just find out the easiest way," and he took hold of the sheet and pulled.

Faith laughed and tugged, and together they tore one of Mrs. Root's best sheets.

Just as Faith was trying to get away and straighten her hair, the lights flashed on. Stephen was responsible. He had gone home, found a fuse, come back and stolen through the cellar window, replaced the one that was burned out, and appeared, smiling nervously, in the living room to receive the applause of the guests.

The rest of the evening was a huge success. The gifts were lovely, and Whisper hugged her book to her as if she never meant to part with it. Joy's present was a pair of skates, and so was Pam's. The twins received their last from the tree, two little wooden horses.

"There," said Bob, "now I know it was all a dream."

"Just so," said Ted, trying to blink back the tears. "They would never have given us these darned things if we were to get live ones."

"What's the matter, buddies?" Edna, on her way to the dining room with Faith, stopped at the look of despair on their downcast faces.

"Oh! nothing," said Ted, bravely, and flung his offending toy horse into the corner behind the Christmas tree.

"I see," laughed Edna. "Well, *cheer up!* That's my solemn advice to you," she said, as she joined Marcia and Gloria.

"Now, what does she mean by that?" asked the twins together.

CHAPTER XV

CHRISTMAS DAY

A PAIR of sleepy brown eyes opened and then closed drowsily, to open again, wide and bright. Joy had just remembered that it was Christmas morning. She sat up in bed, blinked, and then called softly:

"Pam!"

Pam was a sleepy-head, as usual, so Joy had to go into her room and shake her.

"Merry Christmas! lazybones," she cried. "Let's go wake up Mummie and Pops."

"I'm awfully sleepy," said Pam, doubtfully, "but I want to see my stocking, too. Oh! dear!" and she yawned deeply.

Joy ran out of the room and returned with a glass of water. She put her fingers in it and just spattered Pam's freckled nose.

"Oh! I'll get up. Wait a jiffy. Let me just close my eyes while you count ten," Pam begged.

"Never!" Joy refused to listen. "All right," she changed her mind and began; as

she counted, she gradually pulled the bed clothes off.

Pam shut her eyes stubbornly, but it was cold, and before Joy had reached six she flung a pillow at her head. Joy fled to her own room and called back:

"I'll race you getting dressed."

"All right," answered Pam, now fully awake. "No baths this morning; we'll take them this afternoon before the party."

Neither won the race, for they both finished brushing their bobbed heads at the same moment.

"Let's wake Mummie first," Joy whispered, as they went out into the quiet hall.

They tapped gently at Mrs. Payton's door and heard her splashing in the bathtub.

"Hurry, Mummie, we're up and all dressed," they called softly.

"With you in a few minutes, darlings," Mrs. Payton called. "Go wake Pops."

They went past the other rooms, especially Gloria's, on tiptoe, and reached Geoffrey's door down the hall.

"Pops," whispered Pam.

The door opened and he stood before them dressed in a dark blue cheviot suit.

"Well, young ones, I was just coming to call you," he laughed. "Might have known

you'd beat me to it. Don't disturb your mother, Joy; wait until she wakes up herself. We'll go out to the barn and give Cricket and Clinker a lump of sugar for Merry Christmas while we're waiting."

"Oh! Mummie's awake, she'll be down soon. We'll wait in the dining room for her—anyway, I want to say Merry Christmas to Jane and Bridget," Joy replied.

They went down the stairs softly and out to the kitchen. Bridget was busy mixing muffins, and Jane was greasing the tins.

"Merry Christmas, Jane! Merry Christmas, Bridget!" Joy and Pam sang out together.

"Glory be! You're up at the dawn of the day!" said Bridget, wiping her floury hands on her apron.

"I hope you didn't wake your mother, my dear," said Jane. "She was up late last night."

"She's awake now," Joy told her. "She'll be here in a jiffy, and we've got to go to the barn to say 'Merry Christmas' to Patrick and the ponies. Give us some sugar lumps, please, Bridget."

"Jane!" exclaimed Pam, "would you like to have your Christmas presents now or wait for the tree?"

Jane considered a moment, wondering what Pam wanted her to say, and then replied good-naturedly:

"Oh! I think we will wait for the tree; don't you, Bridget?"

"Is it the Christmas tree you mean?" demanded Bridget. "Shure, ye'd never have us miss that, Miss Pam," she said, her eyes twinkling.

"All right," said Pam, seriously. "I thought maybe you were in a hurry for your gifts; I know I am. There's Mummie now."

Light steps came down the stairs; Mrs. Payton joined them, and greeted them all.

"And now, let's go and see the stockings at once," she said.

"But there's Cricket and Clinker and Patrick," Joy protested. "We ought to see them first, oughtn't we?"

"Not without hats and coats, even to the barn. I can't have one of my daughters down with a cold on my wedding day," Mrs. Payton said decidedly. "The ponies will have to wait."

"Then we'll see them after breakfast!" Pam exclaimed. "Let's go to our stockings now."

They went into the library together, and there were the three stockings and one sock,

hung in a row from the mantel. The girls stopped aghast at sight of two little dolls peeking over the tops of theirs.

"Dolls, oh Mummie!" exclaimed Joy in an aggrieved voice.

"Pops, you never!" cried Pam in horror.

Flora and Geoffrey looked at each other.

"We didn't put them there, really we didn't," Geoffrey protested. "Let's see who did."

They took out the dolls, and searched for a tag, but none was to be found. Suddenly Joy's face brightened.

"I know!" she exclaimed. "Uncle William! he'd think we played dolls; and, oh! Pam, how shall we ever say we like them?"

"Well," Pam considered, "as dolls they're awfully sweet. I suppose we could go back to liking them for a day."

Joy sighed.

"I suppose so," she agreed. "Anyway, we can't hurt Uncle William's feelings, so we'll just have to make believe."

"And I suppose we'll have to play with them a little, too," added Pam.

"I never played dolls," Joy said seriously.

"Don't gypsy children?" asked Pam.

"Oh! yes, the girls did, but I always played with Joe, you see," Joy replied.

"Well, never mind the dolls," said Flora. "Get on with the rest of your stocking."

They put the offending dolls to one side and took out the next gift. Their presents were identical. Tangerines came first, and dogs and cats in cinnamon and lemon candy; tissue paper; silver thimble from Miss York; a plaid collar and leash for Soncy and Clown; more tissue paper, a set of pearl cuff pins from Pops; and still more tissue paper, and then a small square box.

"Rings!" the girls exclaimed, and opened them together.

They were rings, very simple little bands of five tiny pearls, with a card attached to each: "To my darling daughter from Mummie."

"Oh, never was anything so heavenly, and we never even guessed!" cried Pam.

"Look, Mummie, it fits exactly," said Joy, slipping it on her little finger.

"Madam," said Geoffrey Hotchkiss, "you are spoiling your two daughters."

"Oh, no, I'm not. They'll be ever so good, just to show me how grateful they are," Flora replied. "Besides, Geoffrey, they are grown-up, and go to parties, so they must have a ring."

"Of course," said Joy and Pam.

"Now you look in your stockings quickly," Joy went on, "I want to see what you have."

Mrs. Payton took out first a tangerine, and then a gold thimble from Miss York; while Geoffrey took out a silver pencil from the same lady. Then Flora found a powder compact from Pam, and a bottle of perfume from Joy. Geoffrey found a tie clasp from his own daughter, and a fountain pen from his future daughter. And at the toe of Mrs. Payton's stocking was a square green velvet box containing a diamond bar pin from Geoffrey.

"Oh, it's beautiful!" exclaimed Joy.

"Mummie, when we grow up and go to dances, can we wear it some time?" asked Pam.

"No, dear, I don't think I'll ever let even my daughters wear it. It's too precious," and Flora smiled her most charming smile.

William Payton interrupted them just as Geoffrey was looking with admiring eyes at Flora's miniature set in brilliants.

"Well! well! Merry Christmas!" William Payton exclaimed, with unusual warmth. "How are my two nieces this white morning?"

"Oh! Uncle William, did you give me this pretty doll?" asked Joy, feeling like a hypocrite.

"Bless us, no! I give two such grown-up ladies a doll? Indeed not! My Christmas gift is hanging on the tree."

"Are you sure?" asked Pam, bewildered.

"Sure? Of course I'm sure," Mr. Payton replied.

"Then Gloria gave them to us," Joy said in a whisper to Pam.

Pam nodded, and they both disappeared, taking their things with them to their rooms.

"What will we do?" asked Joy.

"Simply hide them and never say a word about them. There were no tags on them and after Gloria goes we can give them to the Rocci children. They are six and seven years old, they'll like them," Pam decided.

"It will be heavenly, watching Gloria waiting for us to say something," Joy giggled.

They were all seated at breakfast a little later, when they heard the crunch of ponies' hoofs on the snow, followed by exultant shouts.

The girls dashed to the window and saw the twins riding two piebald ponies up to the piazza.

That was all there was of breakfast for the whole family. They put coats on and hurried out to see them.

"Oh! can't we all go for a ride?" Joy exclaimed.

"Yes, but first don't you want to see the tree?" asked Flora.

"Of course," Pam answered. "Joy forgot the tree."

"We got snowshoes," Bob explained. "I hope you did."

"And skates on shoes, like your's," Ted went on.

"You boys stay for our tree," Mrs. Payton invited; and they all trooped into the library, where the tree stood in the corner of the room, surrounded by packages, and ablaze with real candles.

The girls got their snowshoes, and Pam got a riding crop just like Joy's from the Colonel, and he gave them both puttees.

There was a mysterious box marked: "For the Colonials." They clustered around it and opened it together. Inside of the red box were four other little boxes, and inside they found four pins exactly alike. They looked at them, mystified for a moment, and then Joy exclaimed:

"Colonial Club, of course!"

"Oh! how heavenly of the Colonel to think of that!" Pam cried.

"Let's wear them in a special place," Bob suggested excitedly.

"Over our hearts," Ted went on.

And they all decided that was the best place for them. After they were pinned on, there was time for everybody else's Christmas presents to be inspected. Flora liked the sealing-wax candlestick and Geoffrey his ash tray. Flora received some pretty jewelry, and Uncle William gave the three girls gifts just alike, red leather pocketbooks with mirrors inside.

"Hadn't we better go for our ride now?" Bob said, after Bridget and Jane and Patrick had retired to the kitchen with their presents.

"Yes, I don't think it's fair to keep the boys from their ponies a minute longer," said Geoffrey Hotchkiss, understandingly.

The girls went upstairs to get into their riding togs and their new puttees. When they came down the ponies were making friends on the driveway, their four noses close together, and the three dogs were frisking at their heels.

"Where to?" asked Ted, as they swung into their saddles.

"The Colonel's, of course," answered Pam, and off they went.

They found the Colonel sitting up in his sun porch with a dressing gown on, waiting for the Sergeant to bring him his breakfast. The four Colonials shared in his marmalade and toast and thanked him heartily for the pins.

"The Colonel ought to have one, too," worried Ted, when they were back in their saddles again. "We're broke just now, but we'll get our allowance next week, and if we save for a month—all of us—we ought to be able to buy a pin just like it for him."

"I found out where he got ours," Bob went on.

The girls agreed, and they rode over to Whisper's to see what Christmas had brought her. She had six books, skates, and the mysterious snowshoes.

"Who could have sent them?" she asked, with a puzzled frown.

She was busy helping her aunt fix the turkey for their first Christmas dinner in their little house. They had refused all invitations to dine out because they wanted to share their joy together at home.

The Colonials rode over to the Talcotts' next and received a hearty welcome; then on to Stephen Winthrop's, whose mother had given

him a sweater for Christmas when he wanted a lumberman's jacket, and whose father had given him ten dollars to make up for the disappointment.

"We'll all go down to the drugstore for a feast before the Talcotts go 'way to school," Stephen said, wistfully.

"Guess we're lucky," said Bob as they rode away and headed for the Betts'.

"Guess we are," Ted agreed. "Just look how much nicer Mum is than Stephen's mother."

"Guess we're lucky, too," exclaimed Pam happily.

"Hum," exclaimed Joy, "think of tomorrow!"

CHAPTER XVI

THE TALCOTTS' PARTY

THERE was a saying in Birchwood that all parties were alike except when the Talcotts gave them. Other parties might have more original forms of entertainment, and the guests enjoy a very good time; but it was never quite the same uproariously good time that they had at the Talcotts'.

To-day's Christmas party was no exception. The guests, old and young, began arriving about three o'clock. Mrs. Talcott met them at the door, and ushered them into the living room, where Mr. Talcott, dressed up as Santa Claus, stuffed with many pillows, was dispensing gifts.

The Roots and the Paytons were the first to arrive, with Geoffrey Hotchkiss and Pam.

"Well, here we have our little friend, Joy! Have you been a good little girl, Joy?" Mr. Talcott asked, beaming.

"Yes, sir, please," said Joy as if she were a little girl. "I've been a very dood dirl."

"Then you shall have a present from Santa

Claus," Mr. Talcott went on in his best Santa Claus manner; and he rummaged in his bag until he found Joy's present, a tambourine tied with gay colored ribbons.

"And here's Pam's! Pam, I've been hearing some naughty things about you. You don't study your arithmetic very well."

"Oh! but, Santa Claus, I hate arithmetic, so won't you please give me my present?"

"I will give you a present," he replied, "and you must read, mark, learn and inwardly digest it," and he handed her what appeared to be a book, but turned out to be a box of candy.

"I'll inwardly digest it," laughed Pam.

"And here are my little friends, the twins. Let's see what Santa Claus has for them," and he pulled out of his bag two tin horns.

"Now then, step up. I see little Faithy Hunt, with little Marcia and Edna."

Faith pulled back, and put her finger in her mouth.

"Don't want to speak to Santa Claus," she said, in baby talk.

Edna rose to the occasion at once.

"Come now, be a good girl, shake hands with Santa Claus, and thank him for your pretty present," she said.

"Ain't dot no present," Faith persisted.

"Baby, if you don't go right up and shake hands with Santa Claus. mother will take you home and spank you."

"No, no, no, no." Faith stamped a sizable foot, and pretended to cry. "Don't want to speak to horrid mans," she insisted.

"What a naughty little girl!" said Santa Claus. "I'm afraid this is all she deserves," and he handed her a switch and a lump of coal, which he had been saving for Spruce.

To Edna and Marcia he gave miniature basket balls filled with candy. Gloria followed them and received a powder puff. She thought, of course, that Mr. Talcott knew of the time when Joy and Pam and the twins had washed her face; but, truth to tell, the Talcotts knew nothing about it.

"You can't use it," said Bob, as she stepped to one side.

"Who said I was going to?" said Gloria, crossly.

"Here's Stephen," Spruce said, as Stephen edged into the room. "What have you got for him in your bag?"

"Oh, I have something very, very nice for little Stevie."

"Come and shake hands with Santa

Claus, Stevie." Dandy pulled him forward.

"In fact," said Santa Claus, digging down into his bag, "I have two presents for Stevie."

"Aw! shucks!" said Stephen, his ears growing redder and redder.

Mr. Talcott handed him the biggest package in the bag, which proved to be a toy drum and a book on Electricity.

"That's swell," said Stephen, and retired to a corner.

"Where's my little friend, Whisper, and that imp who belongs to me named Merry?"

"Here we are, Daddy—I mean Santa Claus," and Merry came forward, dragging Whisper, who looked very shy and pretty in her new party dress.

Out of the bag came a doll for Whisper and a harmonica for Merry with a tag on it written in Dandy's hand:

"When this you see
Remember me
And cease to gabble
But music babble."

"Silly!" said Merry. "You don't babble music."

"You do, too," said Dandy, admitting his authorship. "Brooks babble, and they sing more than they talk."

"Why, how heavenly!" exclaimed Merry. "Of course they do. Dandy darling, you're a

wonderful poet, and I'll tell Miss Lathrop all about it when I see her after vacation."

Whisper was holding her doll lovingly. She knew the other girls didn't play with dolls, but for the life of her she couldn't help cuddling this little pink and white bundle of prettiness.

The rest of the boys and girls received horns and drums, and the elders' toys that had some special meaning.

Then Bob started a parade, and all playing just as loudly as they could on their harmonicas, and horns, with Stephen playing a lively tatoo on his drum, they wound in and out of the living room, through the dining room and into the hall, sounding a lively din.

At half-past four Mrs. Talcott raised her hand for silence.

"Everybody get on their things, ready to go out," she said, "and then follow Tom and me."

She led the way down the front drive and started for the village.

Mr. Talcott, who really had a very fine voice, started the old carol, "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen."

Before they knew where they were, Mrs. Talcott had led them all into church, where they sang all the old Christmas hymns at Mr. Forbes' evening service. When it was over,

they marched home through the deepening twilight to the entrance of the Talcotts' place.

"Now we must say good night," said Mrs. Payton.

"Good night!" expostulated Mrs. Talcott. "Why, the party hasn't half begun! Come back to the house this minute."

"I wondered about refreshments," said Bob; and everybody laughed.

He did not have to wonder long, for they were served soon after they were back in the house,—cold turkey sandwiches, hot bouillon, cranberry sauce and fruit salad.

In spite of Christmas dinners, everybody was hungry. They had no sooner finished their bouillon than Dandy handed around a basket of motto crackers, and Spruce gave everyone a toy balloon. They all pulled their snaps and on opening the crackers, found caps and little trinkets and mottoes.

They blew up the balloons, and tossed them from one to another. Then Spruce and Dandy made up a game that if you let your ball touch the floor you couldn't have anything to eat until your opponent missed too. This was rather hard on the girls, and poor Whisper hardly got a bite until Mr. Talcott came to her aid.

At nine o'clock everybody was good and tired, and with thoughts of Mrs. Payton's

wedding the next day, the party broke up early.

Geoffrey Hotchkiss and Pam were going back to their own house, for as Bridget said, it would be unlucky for the groom to see the bride before the ceremony.

Joy walked home with her hand in Uncle William's, who had declared to Geraldine Talcott that he had never spent such a happy Christmas day.

When they reached the house, Jane met them at the door.

"Here's a package for you, my lamb, and goodness knows how it got here! Bridget and I didn't have our backs turned five minutes, when we came in and found it sitting on the kitchen table; and Patrick said he saw nobody in the yard."

"How exciting!" exclaimed the Colonel, who had come home with them. "Open it, and find out at once, Joy, what's in it."

Joy tore off the wrappings with trembling fingers. Who could have sent this mysterious package? Inside was a piece of Arbor Vitæ, a white clover, a dead leaf, a forget-me-not, and a piece of heliotrope, also a sprig of holly.

"Why, what under the sun are all those dead flowers for?" asked Aunt Ida.

Joy sank to her knees on the floor and spread the withered flowers out before her.

"It's a letter from Joe," she explained, as they all clustered around her.

"Read it," demanded the Colonel.

Joy picked up the piece of Arbor Vitæ. "That means eternal friendship," she said seriously. "The white clover means: 'Your thoughts be of me.' The dead leaf means he is a little sad; and the heliotrope means he's devoted to me; while the holly says in gypsy language: 'A Merry Christmas.' "

"How perfectly adorable!" exclaimed Mrs. Payton.

"That gypsy, eh," grumbled Jane, "spiriting in a lot of dried up flowers and himself! Where is he now?"

"Wouldn't wonder if he was out in the barn," commented the Colonel.

But search of the barn proved in vain, and they decided that Joe had gone back to his caravan.

"They must be staying in the city this winter," Joy said; "and Mother Ia hates that."

"No more excitement for a little girl tonight," counseled Flora Payton. "Go to bed."

Joy kissed them all good night and went upstairs, hugging her box of flowers.

CHAPTER XVII

THE WEDDING

WHILE they were at breakfast the next morning the telephone bell rang insistently.

"That must be Amy!" exclaimed Flora, and hurried to answer it.

It was Amy Strong calling up from the docks. Her boat had just gotten in, and she announced, with her usual determination, that she would be down to-day, and would spend a week with Joy after the wedding.

"The wedding is at twelve o'clock; and, Amy, don't be late; but you always are," Flora laughed into the receiver. "Even your boat was late," she added.

Joy's face fell. She was standing beside her mother, and could hear everything Aunt Amy's booming voice had to say.

"Ridiculous! I'll be there on time, of course," she heard her reply.

"Oh, Mummie, must she come?" Joy asked forlornly. "Pam will hate her, I know she will."

"But darling, you mustn't hate Aunt Amy. She's Mother's very best friend. We went to school together, like you and Pam, and she was so good to Mother after you were lost," Flora told her.

"Maybe," Joy said, doubtfully. "But she'll spoil everything, and Sniffs will be scared to death of her."

"Joy," said Flora, as severe as it was possible for her to be, "you must learn to like your Aunt Amy."

"Oh! Mummie," Joy begged, "you mustn't be cross to me on your wedding day, you simply mustn't. I'll like Aunt Amy if I possibly can."

"That's my precious girl," said Flora, and had just stooped to kiss the top of her head when they heard the notes of a violin from the direction of the lawn.

"Joe!" they exclaimed together; and Joy, without a thought of anything else, dashed out of one of the French windows and sped across the lawn in the direction the music came from.

Joe was hiding behind a big oak tree, and he stopped playing abruptly when Joy found him. He looked taller than ever, but thin and pale.

"Joe, where did you come from? Where

did you sleep last night? And what are you doing in this part of the country?" Joy asked, all at once.

"We are staying in New York this winter. Mother Ia is very sick, and cannot take the road. For me, I hate those cramped stores, and the many people; so I came out to wish your mother happiness on her wedding day," Joe replied.

"Who told you Mummie was going to be married?" Joy asked in wonder.

"It might have been a bird," said Joe, "or it might have been a squirrel, or it might have been old Toon, who sharpens your knives, and often brings us news of the little *Gajo.*"

Flora Payton came across the lawn to them.

"Well, Joe," she said, holding out both her hands, "this is the nicest wedding present you could have given me. Will you do one thing more for me? Come play for my guests this afternoon?"

"If you wish it," Joe answered simply.

"Indeed, I do wish it," laughed Flora. "It will be the greatest treat, and now come into the house and have some breakfast."

"But I've already had my breakfast with the Colonel," Joe replied. "Still, I could eat two," he added, with a little twinkle in his eye.

"Did you stay with the Colonel last night?" Joy asked.

"I did," Joe nodded. "He found me asleep in his haymow, and wouldn't let me stay there. I was glad, because I was cold."

"Of course, you were, and you must be frozen now. Come into the house at once. There are a million things to do, and you can help.

Flora hurried them indoors and left them watching the florist decorate the living room for the simple reception which was to follow the church ceremony.

She returned a few minutes later to see how things were progressing, and heard Joe say:

"Not that way, stupid. Flowers don't grow like that. Give them to me."

In the end it was Joe who decorated the room, the local florist taking his orders meekly from the imperious gypsy boy.

The morning fled by. Pam stayed with her father till her curiosity could stand it no longer, then she came over to the house.

"I know it's deserting Pops," she said, "but I simply couldn't stay away another minute. Besides, Uncle Craig is there and they're talking about art, so he isn't alone."

"Is Uncle Craig an artist?" Joy asked. "What fun! So is Aunt Amy."

"He knows Aunt Amy," Pam replied, "but"—she hesitated—"I don't think he likes her very much."

"Oh! I know I'll like Uncle Craig, then," said Joy.

"Children, children," called Flora from the doorway, "hurry into your coats and hats, and go down to the station to meet Aunt Amy; be sure to explain why I didn't come. Her train will be in at eleven o'clock, and it's a quarter of now."

"But, Mummie, I thought she was coming by car!" Pam exclaimed.

"She was, but the car broke down before they got to Newark and now she has to come by train," Flora answered.

"Can we take Joe with us?" Joy asked.

"Joe!" Pam exclaimed. "Is he here?"

"Yes. I didn't have a second to tell you," Joy replied.

"No, dear, leave Joe with me," Flora Payton decided. "He's really wonderful with the decorations."

The girls went off alone in the car. Because the roads were bad on account of the snow, they were late in reaching the station, to find Amy Strong pacing to and fro on the platform, trying to keep warm.

"Oh! Aunt Amy, I'm so sorry we're late.

Mother just couldn't come, she was so busy—of course, everything is terribly exciting today—and this is Pam."

"Save your words, child, save your words," said Amy Strong. "So this is Pam, eh? I'll paint you; I like your red hair."

"Oh! how heavenly!" Pam exclaimed. "Uncle Craig is going to paint me, too."

"Craig?" said Amy Strong. "Child, do you mean by any chance Craig Loring?"

"Yes, Pops' best man for the wedding," Pam replied.

"My word! Is that man here?" Amy Strong demanded.

Pam giggled.

"That's just exactly what he said about you," she replied.

"Oh! he did, eh? Very likely. So he's going to paint your picture, is he? Well, I hope you recognize it when he gets finished; but let's talk about something pleasant."

Pam had an uncontrollable fit of giggles, and Joy felt in spite of her snubbing, she must come to the rescue.

"I wish you'd paint us and the dogs and the ponies," she said, hesitatingly.

"So I will, so I will—very good suggestion. And how are the gypsies?" Amy Strong asked abruptly.

"Joe is here," Joy told her. "He's going to play at Mummie's reception."

"Very unwise," was Amy Strong's decision, but she kept it to herself.

Gloria met them at the door.

"Do hurry and get dressed," she besought. "We are going to be late. Aunt Flora's all ready, and the twins are here; and they look adorable."

Joy had time to wonder as she raced upstairs just how Bob would like being called "adorable."

They changed into their dresses in record time and did not keep Geoffrey Hotchkiss waiting very long.

The wedding procession was headed by Uncle William and Flora, preceded by Joy and Bob and Pam and Ted, carrying baskets of roses. The girls wore soft, fluffy white, and the twins were resplendent in Eton suits.

The bride was in palest mauve with a touch of blue and moleskin, and wore a small hat. She did not wear the customary white because she was a widow.

The church was filled with young people, for all Joy's and Pam's friends were there. Whisper and Merry stood side by side, Whisper's long hair flowing about her shoulders. She looked like Alice in Wonderland.

The service was very short and simple. In the middle of it Clown walked sedately up the aisle. Joe, who was sitting with the Colonel, came to the rescue just as the dog was about to jump up on Joy. He picked him up and spoke to him softly, and Clown settled down in his arms, while the Colonel caught the Colonials' four pairs of eyes, and coughed noisily.

After the ceremony they all returned to the Paytons' and had luncheon, the elders in the dining room at the long table, beautifully decorated by Gloria; but the young people had much the best time of it at a picnic lunch in the library. The living room was reserved for the reception.

Joe and Spruce went off in the corner and talked. Spruce was trying to urge Joe to go to the Colonel's, and Joe was denying the idea that he could ever become a *Gajo*.

"No, friend, I must stay with my gypsies," he said, wearily. "Some day I shall be their chief, and they need me. Now, I go to play for Mrs. Payton."

He went, and the rest of the afternoon he played, hidden by the flowers, until the Colonel, who was very proud that Joe had come to his house, even if it were only to the barn for shelter, pulled him out, and made

him play before the rest of the guests. His red sash gave a vivid touch of color against the background of pale dresses, and dark suits.

The girls, with Faith Hunt in the center, talked boarding school, and the boys were excluded from the conversation.

Joe was going to stay with Toon that night, and came to say good-by to Joy after the reception was over. She was busy breaking up the candy ball that had decorated the table.

"Oh! Joe," Joy said plaintively, "I wish you would come and live with the Colonel. Don't you really think it's fun being a *Gajo?*"

"But I am not a *Gajo;* I am a gypsy," said Joe, simply.

"And oh, thank you, for the flowers, Joe; I loved them. I hadn't forgotten how to read them, either," Joy went on.

Joe nodded. "No need to talk," he said. "Good-by," and he was gone.

Spruce walked down the road with him, and Joy watched him out of sight with keen regret. If he would only stay, what heaps of fun they could have together!

Then she turned back to Pam and the rest. They were listening to Amy Strong and

"But I am not a Gajo; I am a Gypsy," said Joe simply.

Craig Loring, who were talking about them.

"I'm going to paint them first," said Amy Strong. "My time is limited."

"My dear lady, no more limited than mine," returned Craig Loring.

And they stood and glared at each other.

"Why not paint them at the same time?" asked the Colonel, chuckling.

"Oh, very well," said Amy Strong.

"We will. It's a compromise," said Craig Loring, and they both laughed.

CHAPTER XVIII

HONOR

FLORA, now Mrs. Hotchkiss, and Geoffrey had been gone a week. New Year's Day had come and gone, the Christmas vacation was over, and to-morrow school would open again.

Pam and Joy were glad of it. They had posed all the week in the Hotchkiss stable with Clinker and Cricket and Soncy and Clown, and they had learned that, flattering though it may seem to be asked to pose for two leading artists, it is not a bit of fun actually doing it.

Of the two, they much preferred Uncle Craig. He thought oftener of rest times, and gave them candy to keep them amused; while Aunt Amy painted steadily away, and never thought her subjects might be tired. But if the girls liked Craig Loring the better, the ponies and the dogs liked Aunt Amy. She could make them stand quiet at a word and they adored her. Craig Loring called her "Rosa Bonheur," much to her secret satis-

faction, although she pretended to be angry.

The only fun the girls had was when the posing finished. They would all make chocolate on the big stove in the barn, and Whisper and Merry would join them. Whisper had adopted Aunt Amy at once, and Amy Strong, in her queer, brusque way, returned the child's affection.

They were all living at the Payton house, which was on the market for rent—that is, all except Craig Loring, who stopped at the Club.

"Gee," Bob said, coming home from Sunday School the last day of vacation, "I'll bet you girls are glad that posing is over."

"We are," Joy replied. "It was fun sometimes, but mostly it was horrid; and I'm awfully stiff."

"I should think you would be," Ted agreed. "I couldn't keep still so long."

"Let's walk up past the house and see how the carpenters have gotten on with Pops' new studio," Pam suggested.

Flora's wedding present to her husband was to be a studio, built a couple of hundred feet from the house—a big room that was two stories high, and went up to a peak in the center, with oak rafters, hanging lights of wrought iron, and a big open fireplace at one end.

It was not nearly finished when the four Colonials went to inspect it, but they had lots of fun climbing from beam to beam and looking down the chimney.

"What a bully place for a clubhouse this would be!" said Bob.

"Yes," said Pam, doubtfully, "but I don't think Pops would let us use it."

"Of course, he wouldn't, silly; but wouldn't it be fun to build a house of our own?" said Bob, fired with a new idea.

"In the tree tops," exclaimed Pam, "like Peter Pan!"

"Don't be foolish," Ted admonished. "How could we get the wood up to the top of a tree, and build a house?"

"We might have a gypsy tent on the ground," Joy suggested.

"I don't think Colonials lived in a tent," said Bob. "We'll ask the Colonel about it. Maybe he will let the Sergeant help us build a hut."

"We can't begin it till Spring," Ted said, "and that's miles off."

"Well, we can think about it," returned Bob, and they started for home still thinking.

Joy was carrying her new bag of red leather that Uncle William had given her, and she opened it to put away the quarter she had not

put in the plate at church. The rest went down in their pockets and brought up their money. This was to start the fund for the Colonel's pin.

Joy opened the little red purse inside the bag for the first time, and to her great surprise she took out a shining gold piece.

"Look at this, oh, look quickly! It's five dollars—it says so! Now we can buy the pin right away!" she exclaimed.

"Nothing doing," Bob replied. "That would be you, and not us."

"But you could pay me back," Joy protested, "and think what fun it will be not having to wait all those weeks for it. Why, we could get it here by next Monday—that's a week from to-morrow—and we have a meeting then."

"All right," said Bob, slightly disgruntled, "we'll do it, but we pay you back."

"Pam, look in your bag. Maybe you've got one, too," Ted suggested.

Pam looked, and there was a coin just like Joy's in her little purse.

"How precious of Uncle William to give me one too!" she said excitedly. "Joy, we'll have to write him a letter this very afternoon."

The Paytons had gone home the day after the wedding.

"On our new writing paper," Joy replied.

"I hate to write letters," said Bob. "Let's go down to the drugstore and get an ice-cream cone with the plate money we saved this morning."

"No, you don't; I'll treat you to ice cream," said Pam, "though if Sniffs knew it she'd have a fit, and so would your mother, but we'll take the money back and give it to Dr. Forbes. It was all right—at least, I guess it was—to save it for the Colonel, but I don't think it would be nice to use it for ice-cream cones."

They walked back to the village and gave the money to the mystified but smiling Dr. Forbes; then they had the forbidden ice-cream cones.

On the way home Bob cleared his voice and spoke, because he felt he must, on a subject long uppermost in his mind.

"You girls are coming to school tomorrow," he said, and Ted looked uncomfortable.

"Yes, isn't it great!" Pam replied.

But Joy said: "Well?" and waited.

"And you know you'll expect us to play with you at recess, and we simply can't," Bob went on.

"Why not?" Pam demanded.

"Because the fellows would call us 'Sissy'

if we did, that's why." Bob hated to admit such a thing, but he felt he must in common honesty.

"But you play with us after school," Pam said, wonderingly.

"I know," Ted answered her, "but that's different. At school we sit on opposite sides of the room and at recess we go to different parts of the grounds, girls on one side and boys on the other."

"But you could come over to the girls' side," Pam insisted.

But Joy interrupted.

"I understand," she said, "it's just different at school, Pam, and the boys would feel silly if they came over to our side with nobody but girls there. Don't you see?"

"No," said Pam, "I don't, and I think it's mean."

"Oh! Pam," Ted begged, "don't be cross. You'll see to-morrow."

Joy nodded, and the boys left to go home to their Sunday dinner.

"Joy understands a fellow," said Bob, as they scuffled through the snow.

The girls found a motor drawn up beside the front steps as they reached their house, and inside sat a girl about Gloria's age. She had smooth black hair, an oval face and calm

gray eyes. She gave one the impression of never being in a hurry, and had a slow, crooked smile that was fascinating to watch. This girl was not exactly beautiful, but she was very interesting and thoroughly likable at first glance.

The girls hesitated, not knowing whether to speak to her or not, but she settled that point for them.

"Hello!" she greeted slowly; "do you live around here?"

"Yes," replied Joy, "we live in this very house. Have you come to rent it?"

"I don't know," the girl replied calmly. "Mother and father have looked at a million houses, and they can't make up their minds. Are you going away?"

"Just across the fields to that white house," Pam explained, pointing. "What's your name? Mine is Pam Hotchkiss, and this is Joy Payton, but we're sisters."

"What fun!" the girl replied. "But how can you be with different names?"

"Her mother married my father," said Pam. "Wasn't that exciting?"

"Looks so," returned the girl. "Well, my name's a funny one, Honour Hare, and they call me 'Rabbit' for the Hare, you see."

"Oh, I like that!" Joy exclaimed.

She had taken a special fancy to this girl, and so had Pam.

"I do hope your mother and father like this place," she went on.

"Yes, it's highly satisfactory, and we'll take it for two years," they heard a voice say, and looked up to see a plain, simply dressed little woman, and a tall, round-shouldered man standing on the steps beside Amy Strong.

"Hello, Rabbit, do you want to have a look 'round? We've found a home at last," the man said.

"Oh! I'll have lots of time to look at it later," Honour replied lazily. "I'm glad you've taken it, even if I am going to be away at boarding school. Let me present you to my two new friends."

They shook hands.

"Where do you go to boarding school?" asked Joy eagerly. "We're going to Brookside some day."

"I'm for Hilton," laughed Honour, "but I'll see you in vacs."

When the final date for their moving in was settled, the Hares drove away, Honour waving until they were out of sight.

"She reminds me a little bit of Faith Hunt," said Pam.

"Wish she were going to Brookside," sighed Joy.

School began the next morning, and the girls felt very strange, indeed, in their hard seats at their neat desks.

Miss Lathrop made not the slightest fuss over them, which surprised them a little; but at recess the girls, led by Merry, crowded around to welcome them, and the new-comers proved valuable helpers in a game of hand-ball that was in progress. None of the boys came near them except Stephen, who came over, shook hands gravely, and returned to his own side.

In the afternoon they went over to the Roots' to say good-by to Marcia and Edna, and made them promise to write all about boarding school.

"And give our love to Gloria," added Joy.

"And Faith," called Pam, "and remember, we'll be there soon."

"We will pave the way," laughed Edna. "Good-by, and don't let Ted and Bob miss me too much," she said, as they drove off.

They were going in the car to Brookside with Mrs. Root and Mrs. Gordon.

Ted and Bob waved only; they had nothing to say. Tears were perilously near the surface, and they were glad when they went to

the station to see the Talcotts and Betts off to the Military Academy, where some day they hoped to go.

There was a lull after the train pulled out, and they all looked dejectedly at one another. Merry was weeping in her mother's arms, and Whisper was trying to console her. Stephen Winthrop was looking steadfastly down the long vista of tracks. He saw them through a mist; his fists were tight clenched.

"Let's go to the Colonel's," said Bob. "Gee! I hope he has plenty of corned beef. I need it to-day," he added.

CHAPTER XIX

LAST DAYS

THE box with the pin inside arrived on the following Monday morning, and great was the excitement it afforded Joy and Pam. Whisper was not taken into their confidence because they knew she would have to tell Merry, and Merry had never been known to keep a secret in all her life.

The twins were telephoned at once. Pam wanted to wait and surprise them at school, but the wiser Joy knew it was better to keep all their fun out of school hours, although this time she reckoned without Bob.

She was sitting quietly at her desk, trying to remember the date of the Battle of Hastings, when something hit her hand and she looked down to find a note on her desk. It had been folded to make an arrow and it had landed just in the right place, but it had not landed without the keen eye of Miss Lathrop (who was having early morning study hour) wanted to wait and surprise them at school, detecting it.

"Joyce,"—Miss Lathrop was the only one who ever called Joy by her right name—"Joyce, bring that note to me."

Joy obeyed reluctantly.

"It's my note," she said, as she handed it to her.

"Don't be rude," said Miss Lathrop, and very calmly—as she did everything—she opened the note.

"It's such a bully day, let's go for a ride on our ponies after we've given the pin to the Colonel. Keep it mum. Bob."

Bob wrote in a big, round hand, and Joy, standing beside the desk, saw every word. She signaled "Yes" to Bob, who was waiting in his seat expectantly across the room.

"Bob," asked Miss Lathrop, "did you write this note?"

"Yes, Miss Lathrop, I did," Bob admitted.

"And may I ask what pin you are going to give the Colonel? I disapprove heartily of secret societies, and I notice that four of you are wearing new pins, and I want to know the meaning of them."

Then it was that Joy had an inspiration.

"Ask the Colonel," she answered, loud enough for the rest of the Colonials to hear. "He is president, and we can't say a word until he says we can."

"I shall indeed speak to the Colonel," said Miss Lathrop, so upset that she forgot to tell them they were kept in because of the note, and she saw them slide past her door with only a murmur of protest that did not reach their ears.

After school they fled at once to the Colonel, and after presenting him with his pin, they told him their troubles. First, the Colonel laughed uproariously; then he became angry.

"She's a meddler, that's what she is. I shan't wait for her to come to me, I'll go straight to her," he said. "You ride this afternoon, and forget tea to-day."

Whatever it was that he said to Miss Lathrop must have been just the right thing, for that lady met the four rather anxious Colonials the next morning with a twinkle in her eye, and told them that on investigating the matter she had learned that the Colonials had a very worthy aim, so that she objected no longer. In fact, she showed marked interest in their new pins.

"The Colonel didn't tell you what it was, did he?" asked Pam, jealously.

"Well, not exactly," Miss Lathrop replied, "but enough to make me feel that four of you are quite enough of a membership," and she laughed a little.

They would have helped the Sergeant with tea that afternoon to make up for the day before, but the Colonel told them that he had an engagement for tea with Miss Strong and Mr. Loring, who were indulging in a great discussion as to where to hang the portraits, now that they were finished.

"Oh! but I can tell them," said Joy. "The one Uncle Craig did ought to go in Pops' studio; the one Aunt Amy did in Mummie's pretty little morning room; then we'll both be with them all the time."

And that's the way it was finally settled.

There was much bustle and excitement at the house these days, for they were getting ready to move, so that the Hares might take possession the first of March.

The snow continued, and the children had a chance to use their snowshoes to advantage. Whisper often wondered, as she buckled hers around her small foot, who had given them to her, but she did not find out, though her suspicion rested on each one of her friends.

Then came the day, which was after to be called "Whisper's day," when with Aunt Amy they went into town to choose their bedroom furniture. Whisper went with them. They were to room together, for the Hotchkiss house was not as large as the Paytons', so the

old playroom had been changed into a bedroom and the attic made over into a study. With big chintz chairs to read in on rainy days, and a spinnet desk for each one that wished to do her home work, so far this room had held their attention, and they had given little thought to their bedroom, taking it for granted that they would sleep in white twin beds, and share the same white dresser; but Amy Strong, who was redecorating the house, had other views.

First, she took them to her studio, where she let them select what paintings they liked.

Whisper clasped her hands with joy at sight of the lovely room overlooking a green park. Then she saw a tiny figure of a little girl dancing, and in her quaint, old-fashioned way, she put her head on one side and looked at it.

The girls were investigating a pile of canvases in one corner, and Amy Strong gave Whisper her whole attention. Very gently the girl picked up the figure and kissed it.

"Why do you like that?" Amy asked.

"Because it's like the wind," Whisper replied. "It makes me want to do something with my hands—I don't know what," and her fingers unconsciously moulded the air in queer little fluttering gestures.

"Wait a minute," said Amy Strong, and

she went to an untidy desk to come back with a soft piece of putty. "Do what you like with that, and don't pay any attention to us," and she turned her back on Whisper, and walked over to Joy and Pam.

"Well, what have you selected?" she asked. "Hello! do you like that picture of my old flower woman? Well, you may have it, although it is one of the best things I ever did."

"And oh! Aunt Amy, may we have this old-fashioned garden one? It's so bright and cheery!" Pam exclaimed.

"Well, I never!" Amy Strong exclaimed. "Where did you find that? It's one Craig Loring did for me years ago. Yes, take it along if you like."

The girls loitered around the studio an hour more, fooling with the lay figure, and peeking at the various costumes that hung in the closet.

"What a heavenly place to give charades!" said Pam.

"Aunt Amy, didn't I sit on that stool when you painted my picture? And didn't you keep the bunnies in that box over there?" Joy asked.

"Yes, child," Amy answered brusquely, "you have a good memory. Suppose you tell

me why you ran away with the gypsies. Was it because Jane said she would eat your rabbits?"

"I think so," said Joy, wrinkling up her nose, "but it was because I had such fun playing with Joe, too."

"Do you ever get homesick for them?" Amy asked.

"Oh! no, it's ever so much more fun being a *Gajo;* besides, I've got Mummie and Pops now."

"Sensible talk," said Amy abruptly. "And now let's see what Whisper's doing. Let's have a look at it, Whisper."

"Oh! it's silly," laughed Whisper. "I don't know how to do it, but I've always wanted to ever since I first saw Clown.

She held up a little dog's head, well moulded, which caught the likeness to the shaggy Clown cleverly. It was not a masterpiece, but it showed clearly that Whisper had exceptional talent for modeling.

"Well done, child!" Amy exclaimed. "Here, take this putty home with you, and work with it as much as you please, but bring everything you do to me. Now then," she added briskly, "I must have a talk with that little aunt of yours."

"Do you think," asked Whisper shyly,

"that I could ever make anything as lovely as this?"

She touched the figure of the little girl before her.

"Humph!" boomed Amy. "You'll do better. That's not so wonderful—it's the spirit of it that attracts you. But, come along, it's a way past lunch time, and Joy and Pam are bored; and I've no doubt Craig Loring is tearing his hair."

Mr. Loring was to give them luncheon at Joy's favorite tea-room, and he was indeed almost tearing his hair, for they were half an hour late.

After luncheon they went shopping, and selected a bedroom set of pale apple green, with medallions of flowers. The beds were small four-posters and they chose white fluffy dotted-swiss for tester and valance. There were little things as well as big things to be purchased, such as sets of white ivory toilet articles for the new bureaus. Joy had hers marked in yellow and Pam in green.

The things were not sent to the house for a week, but the time flew by.

Miss York was all aflutter over the news of Whisper's genius, and promised to do everything Miss Strong suggested. There was to be no change, except that Whisper was

to come in town to take a lesson a week from a friend of hers, "and let her play with the putty as much as she wants," Amy concluded.

Whisper was perfectly happy, and while the rest rode their ponies, and coasted, she sat contentedly modeling, and often had to be fairly driven out of doors by a determined Aunt Anne.

Letters had been pouring in from the south, and the honeymooners said they were ready to come back because they were so homesick for Joy and Pam.

It was well on into February, and there was a hint of spring in the air, in spite of the snow that still lingered.

"Oh!" sighed Pam, "just think, next week they'll be here."

"And just think, Aunt Amy has been here with us the whole time instead of a week, and I like her a little bit, don't you, Pam?" Joy asked.

"Oh! I like her a lot," replied Pam; "and Whisper adores her."

"Let's go over and see Merry," Joy suggested. "No use asking Whisper to go, she's got an elephant's head half done and she's hard at work."

"Poor Merry! She must be lonesome these days. We must see more of her," Pam said.

Merry was pathetically glad to see them.

"Girls," she said at once, "I've been thinking, and I guess I'll go to boarding school with you, after all. Whisper doesn't seem to need me."

"Oh! Merry, will you? How wonderful!" exclaimed Joy. "But don't let's plan about school yet; there is all the summer before us, and, thank goodness, it's coming soon."

"Let's get our mothers to go to the same place at the seashore," Pam suggested.

"Oh! that would be heavenly!" said Merry.

And they fell to making plans.

The next week they moved into Pam's house and settled down to await the coming of Mummie and Pops.

CHAPTER XX

HOME AGAIN

IT was twilight. A log fire was roaring cheerfully in the fireplace. The house had been inspected and approved of, and at last they came to the studio.

Mummie dropped down in her big chair, and Joy sat on a stool at her feet. Pops took his chair, while Pam sank to the floor and rested her head on his knee.

"Well, daughters, have you missed your parents?" asked Pops.

"Oh! yes!" exclaimed both the girls in hushed voices.

"Don't talk, Geoffrey, let's just sit here and realize how happy we are," said Mummie.

And so they sat until the shadows lengthened, and only the firelight filled the room, each busy with his or her own thoughts, and perfectly content to await the next adventure.

THE END

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